

Reporters are faced with the daily choice of painstakingly researching stories or writing whatever people tell them. Both approaches pay the same.

Scott Adams

We live in a world where media coverage can have a dramatic impact on public opinion and, eventually, changes in policy. Knowing how to interact with the media and being ready to effectively tell your story to reporters can be a great way to advance your cause.

A quality personal story about why an issue is important can turn a boring news blurb into an excellent story that attracts and persuades readers or viewers. Reporters cannot do their job without hearing from people like you because their job is to find a story and your story could just be what they need.

The more skilled you are at interviewing, the more likely it is that your story will be picked up by the media and the more likely it is that they will come back to you for follow up interviews. Using the media for successful advocacy is a skill that is only developed through practice and preparation.

In this section:

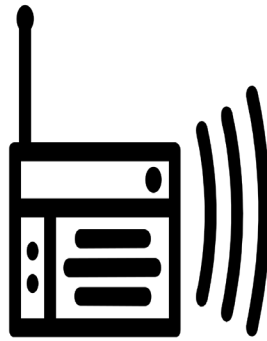
- The different types of traditional media
- How to prepare for an interview
- Key techniques for a successful interview
- Ways to make sure your message is heard
- Ways to avoid difficult questions



NEWSPAPERS

ALL ABOUT THE WORDS

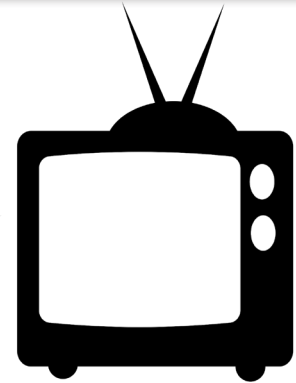
- Longer, more detailed interview
- More emphasis on content than style
 - Probably more knowledgeable reporter



RADIO

YOUR VOICE IS KEY

- Emphasis on voice, pace, inflection
 - You can use notes
- Keep answers short, but live interviews will require good conversation



TELEVISION

VISUAL, BUT VOICE MATTERS

- Requires short answers – 10 seconds or less – create soundbites
 - State conclusions first
- More emphasis on style and appearance

NO MATTER THE MEDIA APPEARANCE IS KEY

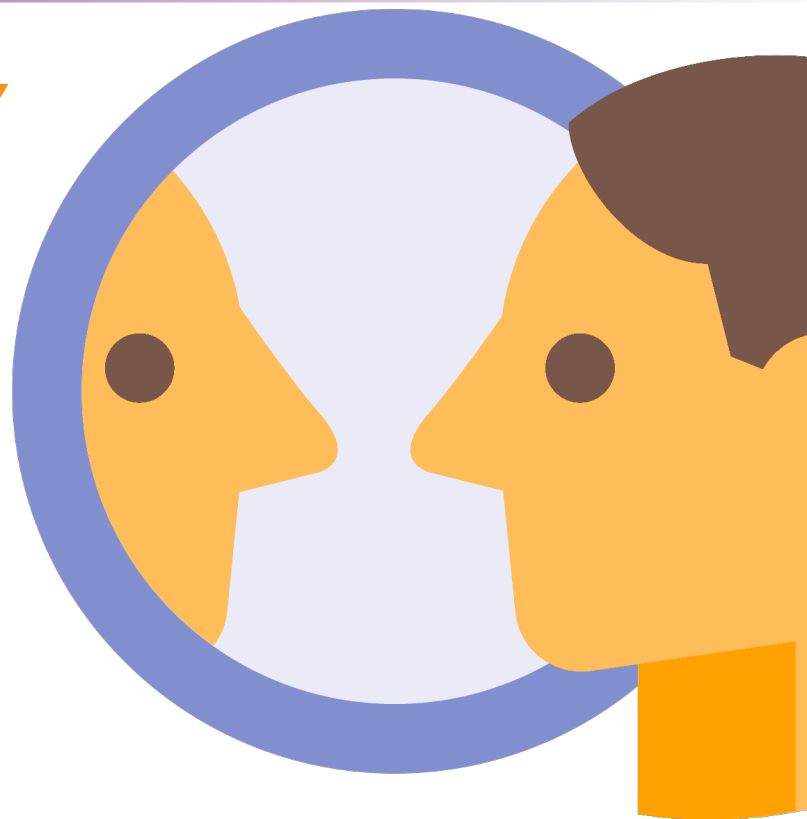
Even for a newspaper interview, first impressions matter. The more professional you look, the better your message will be perceived.

WHAT TO WEAR:

Choose solid, neutral colors – black, grey and navy work well. Avoid prints, patterns, and loud ties.

GROOM WELL

Make sure hair is neat, clean glasses, and avoid things like large jewelry or other “statement” choices.



7.4

seconds

THE AVERAGE TV NEWS SOUNDBITE IS ONLY 7.4 SECONDS

That means you have to make every word you use count during an interview. Identify your key message, be direct, avoid jargon and make your key point in the first 10 seconds of the interview.

SPEAK WITH AUTHORITY

The tone of your voice and the words you use can have a major impact on how your message is received. Use powerful language instead of weak speak.

WEAK SPEAK:

- Saying “I think” or “I guess” instead of “I know”
- Saying “I’m not an expert”
- Over apologizing
- Using qualifiers like “Sort of”
- Using fillers like “You know”
- Upspeaking - ending sentences on an upward inflection

POWERFUL LANGUAGE:

- Framing your message positively
- Affirmative phrases like “We are confident”
- Using action verbs whenever possible
- Keeping it short and sweet
- Having a clear takeaway message

MORE ONLINE:

Scan this QR code or visit <https://youtu.be/LGAMd-tT6fQ> to watch a great example of how upspeak prevents you from speaking with authority and conviction.



MAKE SURE YOU USE THE RIGHT

WORDS

Misuse	Explanation
Irregardless	Nonstandard English - avoid using. It's "irrespective" or "regardless."
Very Unique	Unique means one of a kind. It either is or isn't. No qualifier is necessary.
Completely Destroyed	Destroyed is another absolute. It either is or it isn't.
A myriad of...	Myriad stands alone, Should be "myriad..." (You fill in the blank - i.e. She has myriad responsibilities.)
The media is...	"Media" is a plural. Should be "the media are..." You fill in the blank.
Close proximity	Proximity means close.
General consensus	Consensus stands alone.
Point in time	Points are in space. Moments are in time.
I feel badly	That means to do a bad job of feeling. Should be "I feel bad."
Lost (i.e. houses lost)	Use "burned." We're not looking for "lost" houses.
Literally	Means actually. To say a person literally exploded with enthusiasm is probably not accurate (we hope).
Basically	Is one of our most overused words. It means pertaining to forming a base, a fundamental. To say, "Basically, we went home after the game," is not the correct usage of the word.
Imply/Infer	These two are often interchanged. The speaker implies a message and the listener infers meaning from it.
Dilemma	Not just a problem, it is a choice between two equally balanced alternatives.

The key to giving a good interview is to know your subject well and prepare for questions that may be asked. Reporters are always on deadlines, but you always have time to call them back after you have had a moment to collect your thoughts. To handle this professionally, simply ask them about their deadline and get back to them, within the appropriate time.

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE REPORTER ABOUT THE INTERVIEW:

- What is the name of your outlet (newspaper, television, radio station)?
- What is your contact information?
- What is your deadline?
- When and where is the interview, how long will it be?
- Who else, if anyone, is being interviewed? Are you the focus or just a supporting player?
- What is the angle for your story? Will the interview be linked to another story already making headlines?
- Why have they chosen the subject and selected you for the interview?
- Have you covered this topic before?
- When do you plan to run the story? Will the interview be broadcast live?
- For print pieces, do they need a photo?

FIND OUT ABOUT THE JOURNALIST WHO WILL BE INTERVIEWING YOU:

- Investigate their audience. Who are your targets among their audience and what do you need to get across?
- Contact them and agree on the subject to be discussed. Remember the interview starts as soon as you begin talking to the journalist.

There is no such thing as ‘off the record.’

- Define the issues clearly. Ask the journalist what kind of questions they will ask and whether they will be supportive or argumentative.
- Prepare appropriate information beforehand, eg. statistics, facts, and a personal story.
- Make a list of key messages you want to get across with three or four key points for each.
- Prepare catchy sentences (soundbites) that summarize your message.
- Check that you have up-to-date information on your issue.
- Develop a draft list of possible questions, prepare answers to these, and practice responding to them.

ALWAYS ANSWER IN FULL THOUGHTS

Avoid answering with a “yes” or a “no” --- always follow up with why

- “Are you glad you sent your child to a choice school?”
- “I am so happy we chose to send our child to a choice school because it has really helped them improve their education and provided more options for us as a family.”

Always try to repeat the question in your answer:

- “What is your favorite color?”
- “I really love the color blue. It is my favorite because it reminds me of the sky”

Effective messages focus on a structure that is maximized to make sure your sound-bite is heard and used. This starts with an 8-10 second key message followed by supporting facts, statistics, or personal examples and the a rephrasing of the key message.

AN EXAMPLE:

Key Message:

“My current school has provided a better environment for my child.”

Sample Support Points:

“My son’s grades and overall excitement for school completely changed once we started going to the school.”

“The teachers and administrators really care about my child.”

“This option has given my family hope.”

Rephrase key message:

“These are just some of the reasons that my child is in a better environment in this new school.”

YOUR TURN:

Key Message:

Sample Support Points:

Rephrase key message:

DURING AN INTERVIEW

- Speak from the heart
- Try to stay calm
- Remember that you know more than the journalist about the issue
- Keep your answers concise. Use simple language; no acronyms or jargon
- If you need time to think about a response, repeat the question before responding
- Always bring the journalist back to your key messages - repetition helps to get the message across
- Be creative, paint a picture: “Imagine what it must be like...”
- Never answer a reporter’s question in haste without thinking
- Don’t make things up; if you don’t know an answer, say so

Your passion for your story is one of the most valuable things you have in an interview – especially for radio or TV

It is important that your passion is believable and genuine. Be careful not to get too emotional and don't come across as too angry. Make sure you are speaking in a way that can still be understood and avoid doing things like crying or talking too fast because you are excited about the subject.

- It is important to show how much you care about education, and your child. Passion “works” – just don't overdo it.
- If you get emotional, it will stand out in the reporter's and audience's mind but it has to be genuine and they have to understand what you are saying.
- If you get really emotional it is perfectly okay to ask for a minute to compose yourself --- use this time to formulate the most effective response.

Just because you are passionate about your side does not mean you can not also be empathetic to an opposing view

If you are asked about an opposing point of view, it's OK to empathize with where someone else may be coming from, but make sure you can redirect your comments back to your key messages.

Some ways to redirect:

- “I understand how public school parents feel, but...”
- “I've given a lot of thought to that question, and that's why I believe...”
- “I respect that everyone's preferences are different, it's just that from my experience...”

Reporters have feelings too

Reporters are human too. That means they have feelings, both about the issues they are covering and about their own performance as a journalist.

Use those emotions to your advantage:

- Pay attention to how they respond to the issue and modify what you are saying based on their reaction.
- Compliment questions that align with your message. Use the reporter's vanity to your advantage.
- Saying things like “That is a really good question” or “I am glad you asked that” will refocus the report on key points you want to make.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO PRACTICE

USING EMPATHY AND PASSION
IN AN INTERVIEW

1. Why did you choose the school you send your child to?
2. What are some of the benefits you have seen with your child being in a current school?
3. Don't you feel that sending a child to your choice school undermines the success of your neighborhood schools?
4. Do you feel like your child is getting a better education than they would in a traditional neighborhood school?



What is the most important message you want to get across? This is your headline

SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO PRACTICE

HEADLINING

Headlining is an interview technique that identifies THE key message you want to make and distills it down to its key points. Like the newspaper pictured above, your headline should just be a couple of seconds long but clearly express your message. You can flush out details and additional points later in the interview.

If a reporter is only going to use one quote from your interview it should be your headline, and as a result your headline should be part of your first answer and repeated frequently throughout the interview.

A good headline:

- Grabs attention
- Is original
- Is accurate and specific
- Is short and social media friendly

Highlight your headline with phrases like:

- “The most important thing for you to know is ...”
- What I really want you to know is...”

1. What does your child love most about their school?
2. Do you think access to choice schools should be expanded? Why or why not?
3. Would you recommend your child’s school to other parents?
4. How has sending your child to their current school changed your life?

How to deal with difficult questions during an interview

You can control what you say, what you answer and the message you put forth. Know what you want to say before going into an interview and be prepared to so.

Things to keep in mind:

- If you are caught off-guard by a question, ask the reporter to repeat or explain the question. This buys you some time to collect your thoughts.
- If the reporter brings up something you are not familiar with, you can politely decline to answer. It's OK to say "I don't know."
- If you are asked a question you are uncomfortable answering use the "bridging" technique.

Reporters don't always ask questions that set up the messages you want to deliver. Bridging helps you get there.

An important media technique is "bridging." Bridging is a powerful means for taking charge of and controlling an interview. If done well, bridging significantly increases the probability that your key messages will appear in the final news story. By using bridging techniques, a spokesperson can re-focus or re-direct the interview to what is most important, relevant and critical.

Useful bridging phrases:

- "And what's most important to know is..."
- "However, what is more important to look at is..."
- "However, the real issue here is..."
- "And what this all means is..."
- "And what's most important to remember is..."
- "With this in mind, if we look at the bigger picture..."
- "With this in mind, if we take a look back..."
- "If we take a broader perspective..."
- "If we look at the big picture..."
- "Let me put all this in perspective by saying..."
- "What all this information tells me is..."
- "Before we continue, let me take a step back and repeat that..."
- "Before we continue, let me emphasize that..."
- "This is an important point because..."
- "What this all boils down to..."
- "The heart of the matter is..."
- "What matters most in this situation is..."
- "And as I said before..."
- "And if we take a closer look, we would see..."
- "Let me just add to this that..."
- "I think it would be more correct to say..."
- "Let me point out again that..."
- "Let me emphasize again..."
- "In this context, it is essential that I note..."
- "Another thing to remember is..."
- "Before we leave the subject, let me add that..."
- "And that reminds me..."
- "And the one thing that is important to remember is..."
- "What I've said comes down to this..."
- "Here's the real issue..."
- "The key here is..."

SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO PRACTICE

BRIDGING

1. How does your child get to school? Wouldn't it be easier to attend a neighborhood school that you could walk to?
2. Some people say that choice schools are not held as accountable for student performance as they should be. What do you think about this, and do you think that non-district schools are evaluated fairly?
3. District school supporters say that school choice takes away money that could be spent improving district schools. Doesn't sending your child to a school of choice diminish the state's ability to improve public education?
4. Would you like to add anything else? Is there anything I did not ask you that you feel people should know about choice schools?

YOU ALWAYS HAVE THE LAST WORD

Reporters almost always ask if there is anything else you'd like to say or add, or if they have not asked you anything they should have.

DO NOT MISS THIS OPPORTUNITY!

The last thing you say will be the first thing in the reporters mind when they start to work on the story. This is also a great way to sum up different points from the interview and connect them.

Also use this opportunity to highlight anything that has not been discussed yet!

While you do not want to feel too rehearsed for an interview, the more you practice at home the more comfortable you will be during the actual interview

- Choose a person who is serious about helping you, one who will do his or her best in playing the interviewer's role.
- Supply the practice interviewer with your list of anticipated questions. Have the interviewer mix up the list and rephrase the questions in their own style. Instruct the interviewer to press you on those questions and go off on tangents.
- Fully answer each question, but try to redirect the interview back to your agenda of prioritized message points.
- Set a firm time limit that closely approximates what you expect to be given on the program.
- Practice with as many interviewers as possible.
- If you can, videotape or audiotape each interview so that you can critique your answers. Pay particular attention to how you made your main points regardless of the questions.
- If you make a mistake, start over.
- Work to shorten your answers. In a broadcast interview that you know will be edited, a short comment that clearly makes a point is apt to be used.

Other tips to help you succeed in an interview

- Always tell the truth.
- Be confident in what you have to say.
- Consider audio recording the interview and let the reporter know you are doing so – it will keep the reporter honest

Pitfalls to avoid

- **Having words put in your mouth** If a journalist says, 'Don't you think that this is the worst thing that could have happened?' and you agree, it will be reported as though you actually said it yourself.
- **Rebuttal** If a question has a built in premise you do not agree with, then you must rebut it. For example, if the interviewer says, 'So you threw caution to the wind and went ahead with this exciting new project?' you should make plain you only did so after careful consideration.
- **Negatives** In broadcast interviews, try not to repeat a negative statement that you disagree with. If the interviewer says, 'So, this outcome is pretty disastrous?' do not say 'I don't think it is disastrous it's just what we expected in the circumstances.' This just reinforces the idea of disastrous. Better just to say 'No, it's just what we expected.'