

Tips for Communicating with the Public about Research

1. Understand that scientific significance and newsworthiness are not always the same thing. Strong news stories include:
 - Research findings that can be linked to issues of current interest such as the Arab spring, the impact of technology on children and families, and the economy. Holidays, anniversaries, and seasonal changes can also provide a sense of timeliness to findings.
 - Research findings with a local angle, e.g., related to the Michigan economy.
 - Research findings about to be presented at a major national meeting or scheduled to appear in an upcoming journal. Operative words: “to be presented” and “scheduled to appear.” After-the-fact is too late for newsworthy findings. However, feature stories on broad areas of research are timeless.
 - Research findings that are counter-intuitive.
 - Intriguing quests – scientific detective stories.
 - Unique or unusual programs, especially if they represent a solution to a national problem or a response to a national trend. Also, any occurrence in your school, department or program that might be a part of a national trend.
 - Expert commentary on or interpretation of current events, especially if it contributes a fresh point of view.
 - Interesting or unusual research methods; behind-the-scenes stories of how social science is done; stories that shatter stereotypes about scientists and science.
2. Put yourself in the reader’s shoes. Ask yourself, when reading about subjects that are unfamiliar to you:
 - How much time do you have to spend reading this?
 - How much can you remember once you’ve finished?
 - What would make you read and remember more?
3. Remember that readers may be coming to your article or presentation without the benefit of background. Provide context and perspective – concisely.
4. Don’t make your audience feel stupid or excluded. They won’t be in awe of your superior intelligence; they’ll just stop reading or listening. Remember: when you exclude your audience, you lose your audience.
5. Be selective. Focus on three or four key points and use only the most pertinent facts and examples to illustrate them.

6. Start small: Develop a five-minute, non-technical summary of your research. Try it out on non-scientist friends or neighbors. If their eyes glaze over, keep revising and retesting it. Students are off-limits: they are a captive audience and not a good test of whether what you're saying is actually interesting.
7. Use everyday words, vary sentence length and sentence construction, as people normally do when they talk.
8. Use metaphors, analogies and examples to make the unfamiliar familiar (and memorable). When possible, use lively, colorful language for dry, academic terms. Keep asking yourself, "Is there a simpler, more vivid way to say this?"

Tips for Handling Media Interviews

1. Understand the constraints of news reporting: tight deadlines, limited space and time.
2. Know your interviewer. Even experienced and well-informed reporters may be unfamiliar with the details of your field of research. Ask how much the reporter knows about the subject, and be prepared to explain your work as you would to a colleague in a completely unrelated field. But don't talk down to the reporter.
3. Ask what sort of story is being done: news or feature? Will it be an overview of the entire field or will it focus on just your work? If the former, who else will the reporter be talking to about this? Be ready to suggest some colleagues who work in the field and can provide perspective on the significance of the work, but who are not involved in your research.
4. If you need time to prepare, ask for it. But understand that a journalist may be able to give you an hour, but not a week.
5. Prepare by writing down two or three main points, along with facts and examples. Instead of making detailed notes, think of colorful ways to explain your research, using metaphors and analogies.
6. If time permits, write a one-to-two paragraph, non-technical summary of your main message and offer to e-mail it to the reporter before the interview. Also offer to share additional background information.
7. Avoid jargon, even if the reporter understands it. Otherwise, you're relying on the reporter to translate your research to the public.

8. Clarify and ask for feedback during the interview to make sure your message is being understood.
9. Make yourself available for follow-up questions and clarification.
10. Don't expect to see the story before publication. Many publications forbid the practice. However, some reporters will offer to let you review some or all of the piece. You can legitimately ask to have quotes and technical details read back to you for accuracy. You can also ask the reporter when the story is likely to run, and ask them to send you a link to it when it's out or up on their website.
11. Expect edits. A reporter may interview you for an hour and include only a sentence or nothing. Realize that you may have provided important context and background, even if your words were not included. If you were helpful, the reporter will eventually contact you again, and pass your name on to colleagues working on related topics.
12. Contact the News Service at U-M or whatever university you're affiliated with to let the writer covering your area know that you've been interviewed. The writer may want to do a news release on your work or featuring your expertise to post on university websites.