Working With the News Media
NEWS IS:

• Something I don’t know  
• Something that affects my life  
• Fresh information  
• Information that’s useful to a wide range of people  
• What I read in the paper, hear on radio or see on television

Textbook definition:
News: new information about anything, information previously unknown. (Webster’s)

Journalist’s definition:
News: fresh, relevant information about a previously unknown issue/event that can be applied to daily life. Information that is of interest to a wide range of people.

Reporters have to feed an insatiable news machine every day. Your story may be part of that meal. Consider that you may only be able to reach your audience through this one reporter.

Determining Whether Your Story is News

News Elements:

1. Does the story have IMPACT? Does it affect people’s daily lives? Is it a pocketbook issue? Will it change what I do tomorrow? Does it have shock value?
2. Does the story involve PROMINENCE? Is there a big name or prominent institution involved?
3. Is the story PROXIMATE? Readers, viewers and listeners like news when it is close to home. In general, we are more interested in news from our neighborhood, our community, our state and our nation. The closer, the better.
4. If the story involves CONFLICT, it makes news. Battles between political parties, war on drugs, good vs. bad.
5. Is there an UNUSUAL angle to the story? When something right goes wrong, when there’s unusual video or a strange picture, when an organization takes a wild stance, you can bet it will make headlines.
6. Americans love HUMAN INTEREST stories. When it comes to things that touch our heart, we often find it making news. Stories of triumph and tragedy.
7. Consumers like fresh news. The TIMELINESS and CURRENCY of the event or issue can play a role in whether it becomes a news story.

The more “news elements” in a story, the better the news story and greater chance it will make bigger headlines.

Example: You remember how the death of Princess Diana affected most Americans. It hit on nearly every element (except proximity).

JOURNALISM—ART OR SCIENCE?

The art of finding, creating, writing and producing news stories is practiced by journalists. Given the same set of 50 facts about an event, no two journalists will write the same story. They are indeed storytellers and use different techniques to craft stories they can “sell” to an editor.
News Process:
1. Gather facts (interviewing you)
2. Analyze facts
3. Write story
4. Rewrite story

Journalist/Reporter Credibility
Reporters are not licensed. Sincere journalists value their own credibility. They strive to be accurate and ethical. They don’t follow scientific rules, formulas or structure. However, most do follow certain style and ethical guidelines.

Journalism Codes of Ethics
Several professional journalism organizations have written codes of ethical practices. The Society of Professional Journalists and Radio-Television News Directors Association are among the organizations that have codified guidelines many journalists follow.

Code Highlights:
1. Seek the truth and report it
2. Minimize harm, respect human dignity
3. Act independently
4. Be accountable
5. First obligation is to the public
6. Be fair and impartial

Types of Reporters
Most reporters do not identify themselves by type when they call you. However, knowing which type they are can help guide the interview. Don’t be afraid to ask them. “So you cover the education beat right?” It will be a telling question and help you understand how familiar they might be with your issues and topics.

BEAT: The beat writer covers a regular topic or region and most of the stories he/she produces will be from his/her beat. He/she is usually very familiar with the topic/region. For example: court reporters, education reporters, environmental reporters, governmental reporters, etc. This kind of reporter is likely to have more knowledge of you and your field of study. You will probably feel best working with a beat reporter. Most know what they’re looking for from you. They may know your issue’s background (or history).

GENERAL ASSIGNMENT: This kind of reporter covers whatever the editor throws his/her way on a daily basis. He/she will write about and cover everything from a murder to fire to state government. They are likely to be less knowledgeable about your topic, because they’re asked to be an expert about a lot of things. Many will ask broad questions. They expect you to provide issue background or history. This may be their first exposure to your topic.

INVESTIGATIVE: This kind of reporter sometimes wants to undercover corruption or show wrongdoing.
**HARD NEWS**: Your story will be characterized as “hard” news if it is an issue with impact, conflict (controversy) or prominence. If you’re being interviewed for a hard news story, it’s probably a serious issue.

**SOFT NEWS**: Your story is “soft” news when it deals with human interest or the unusual. It is probably an interesting news story, but not likely to be on the front page or first thing in a newscast. It may be considered a feature story.

**MAIN STORY**: Most likely your comments or expertise is being sought because it is the main story. Reporters are sometimes asked to build smaller stories around a main story. The main story is the one with primary information. It is usually serious in nature.

**SIDEBAR**: The sidebar story is designed to complement the main story. It is likely to be related to, but not directly connected to the main story.

**PROFILE**: This type of story is normally about a person, their profession or lifestyle. You might be asked to comment about a prominent person in your field of study.

**ADVANCER**: This story tells about an upcoming event or issue. The reporter must foretell what is expected to happen prior to the event or issue becoming news. Planned or scheduled events can frequently be written about, in detail, prior to the event.

**BEING MEDIA READY**

Before the reporter calls, there are several things you should do to get ready.

Know your issue/topic cold Start a file now for each topic you might be asked to comment on. Put in news clippings, organization statements and notes, your own memos. You’ll be ready and they’ll be handy when the reporter calls. Anticipate current topics that you will likely be asked about. Be confident and credible. You know more than the reporter about your topic.

**THERE’S A REPORTER ON THE PHONE**

Get this information BEFORE you start the interview. Don’t agree to talk with a reporter before you get this information. Call back at a pre-arranged time. Allow time to collect your thoughts and prepare.

Reporter’s Name: ____________________________
Media Outlet/Paper/Station: ____________________________
Callback Phone #: ____________________________
Issue/Topic of Inquiry: ____________________________

Referral from: ____________________________
Deadline: ____________________________
Interview Date/Time: ____________________________

**DEVELOPING YOUR MESSAGE**

You want to appear credible and well-informed.
KNOW YOUR GOAL: Put yourself and your organization in the best light. Communicate your message effectively. Tell them about benefits, results, positive aspects of what you’re doing.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE: Who’s going to read, hear or see this reporter’s story? Should you adjust your comments to fit that audience? Show concern for the affected audience.

ANTICIPATE QUESTIONS: Know the hot topics reporters are likely to call you about and have responses ready. Anticipate the tough questions and be prepared to answer confidently and positively. Try not to be defensive.

USE KEY POINTS: Your message will have key elements. Reporters need to hear those key messages several times. Write them out and rehearse delivery so it is usable by the desired audience.

USE ANSWER ENHANCERS: Help the reporter understand and communicate your message with personal tales or illustrations and examples. Technical answers often need personal stories to have meaning.

AVOID JARGON: You know your field and topic well. The reporter or audience may not. Don’t inject phrases, buzzwords, double-talk and language that takes time from your message. Speak in everyday language. Be clearly understood. Aim for conversational language.

DEVELOPING CREDIBILITY
An attitude others hold toward you at any given time.

• Be sociable – friendly, cheerful, warm, pleasant
• Be competent – knowledgeable, well-trained, prepared
• Be extroverted – bold, assertive, dynamic
• Be composed – poised, in-control, instill confidence
• Be a good character – honest, trustworthy, sympathetic
• Show passion for what you do

ANSWERING QUESTIONS EFFECTIVELY

Multiple Questions: Some reporters fire off several questions at once. Take them one at a time and, if appropriate, answer the most important one first.

Rephrasing: Some reporters need to be told the basics or key points several times. If a reporter tries to rephrase your answer negatively, it’s perfectly acceptable to say, “No what I said was …”

INTERVIEWING DOs AND DON’Ts

1. Don’t be afraid to say ‘I don’t know.” Never try to answer something you clearly aren’t qualified to answer. Refer the reporter to a knowledgeable source or look up the information later.

2. Never, ever go off-the-record. Don’t tell reporters something you don’t want in print or on-the-air. Assume everything you say is going to be published, broadcast or both.
3. Avoid “no comment” situations. Explain why you cannot comment. For example, “I cannot respond directly because of privacy issues …”

4. Stay within your expertise. Don’t try swimming in waters you’re not comfortable being in. You’ll be more credible and respected more when you confine your comments to your field and expertise. Don’t speculate or guess.

5. Don’t talk too much. Answer concisely. Follow your key points and stop.

6. Too many numbers (dollars, test scores, etc.) can overwhelm the key points in your message. Use “smart” numbers to support your case. Be sure the numbers you use are significant. Instead of speaking in millions, use relatable figures like three-out-of-five teachers, etc.

7. Don’t expect the reporter to provide you questions prior to the interview. It’s not proper news etiquette.

8. Don’t ask to preview the story or article prior to publication or broadcast. Do your best as a source and invite the reporter to call back to re-check facts or quotes.

**YOUR INTERVIEW CHECKLIST**

Are you familiar with the media outlet and its audience? ______
Do you know how your interview will be used? ______
Do you know if there are other sources/interviews? ______
Can you meet the reporter’s deadline? ______
Are you rebutting another’s argument or statement? ______
If it’s radio, are you live or taped? ______
If it’s television, dress credibly. ______
Have you considered the difficult questions/answers? ______
Do you know your organization’s policy statements? ______
Do you have your key points handy? ______
Are your notes ready? ______
Can you explain your points concisely? ______
Can you speak without using jargon/buzzwords? ______
Will you actively listen and adjust responses? ______
Do you feel confident and credible? ______
Are you ready with illustrative personal stories? ______
Can you avoid “no comment” and “off the record?” ______
Are you willing to say “I don’t know” when you don’t? ______
Will you invite the reporter to call back? ______

Consider your interview with a reporter as a conversation where you get to speak about a topic you know well.

**WHOOPS, I BLEW IT!**
The interview is over, but you suddenly realize that something you said was wrong. Now what?

- Don’t panic.
• Call the reporter back as soon as possible. Your story may already be published or broadcast if you wait too long.

• Explain your “mis-speak.” Be honest. You could tell the reporter you want to clarify something you just said. For example: “I’m sorry. In our last conversation I said … XYZ. After re-checking some notes (research, resource, policy, etc.), I want you to have the most up to date information. It is … ABC.” Provide the reporter with strong new information in your follow-up call.

• Don’t try to withdraw an earlier statement. You said it, the reporter’s going to hold you to it – unless you provide stronger, new evidence in your follow-up call that outweighs the first statement.

**Post-Interview Protocol**
Your interview is over. Now what?

• Thank the reporter. Show continued interest.
• Ask when the story will be published or broadcast.
• Request a copy of the story – by fax, e-mail or website.
• Follow up. If you don’t get the story, call to ask, request.

**Corrections/Clarifications/Misquotes**
Now you have read, heard or seen the story and your quotes. It’s wrong and you’re upset.

• Call the reporter to discuss the problem. Avoid their deadline. Ask if he/she misunderstood your explanation or answers. Try not to be aggressive.

• Understand that most reporters and editors want feedback-positive or negative.

• Corrections are NOT automatic simply because you ask for one. Only if the facts of the story are clearly wrong are you likely to see a correction or clarification printed. Misinterpretations are usually not corrected.

• Your request for a correction goes to the reporter first, then to his/her editor. If you feel strongly enough about the error, ask for an editor.