

How to Talk to Reporters

Reporters rely on researchers to explain complex issues. They will turn again and again to scholars who understand their needs and talk about ideas and research in accessible and compelling ways.

Reporters may contact a researcher in response to a press release or expert available email from SSN, their university, or their publisher. Researchers can also contact reporters about a new book or study, to comment on a journalist's reporting, or to introduce themselves to reporters who cover their area of expertise. Reporters may also contact scholars they saw on TV, heard on the radio, or read in other outlets.

Before Talking with a Reporter

Reporters appreciate sources that are available and prompt because they are often on tight deadlines. Be as prompt as possible when responding to reporters on the phone or email, especially if you contacted the reporter or if SSN did so on your behalf. This will make the reporter more likely to contact you in the future.

However, when a reporter calls or emails unexpectedly, do not feel pressured to talk immediately. A good practice is to ask what the story is about and find out the deadline for its completion. You can also ask, "Who have you spoken to already?" Asking this question is a good way to learn how the reporter is approaching a story. Then set a time to talk or offer to call back shortly. Take a minute to consider the news outlet's audience, determine your message, and choose a few stories and statistics to illustrate why your contributions are worthwhile. This is also the best time to anticipate and prepare for difficult questions. On the other hand, if you contacted the reporter originally, be sure to consider these questions in advance of their call.

While Talking with a Reporter

Reporters value simple, direct answers and short, vivid stories. Be sure to guide the reporter to your key points and things the reporter really needs to understand. These days, media outlets employ fewer specialists, so reporters may not have the background to know the best questions to ask. In that case, you can politely move the conversation toward what you think the important questions are.

A few words of caution: anything said in an interview can appear in print. To go "off the record" is generally unwise, and "no comment" is never a recommended response. You do not have to answer a question you do not want to answer. Just move back to your main point. Sometimes a reporter will create a silence in an interview in hope of a less thoughtful answer. The appropriate response in such moments is to wait; the reporter will offer a new question. If a reporter asks you a question you do not feel qualified to answer, you can suggest a colleague who is.

After Talking with a Reporter

Reporters appreciate positive, constructive feedback. When you take significant time to share knowledge with a reporter, the reporter is expected to quote you by name at least once. If that does not happen, you can send an email that says: “I saw your piece and thought you gave the issue an excellent treatment. But I noticed that you never quoted me by name. Is there something I should do next time we chat, so that you will have a quote to use?” That will remind the journalist of the reciprocal nature of the relationship.

If the reporter did quote you, and if you liked the piece, send them a short, positive note of thanks. On the other hand, if an important part of the story is factually incorrect, you may ask for an official correction. Contact the reporter before you go to an editor.

The SSN national communications team is available to help members prepare for interviews, search for contact information for journalists, and learn how to build relationships with reporters. The office also shares news stories via social media and highlights them on SSN’s website, so please send links when you or your work are cited in the media.