

A Scientist's Guide to Working with the Media



Introduction

Sharing your science with media outlets can get your work in front of a broader audience and promote the value of scientific research. But it helps to have tips for working with journalists, public information, and communications officers.

This guide is meant to help you effectively convey the value of your work to journalists and the audiences they represent. Read on to learn about what makes science newsworthy, how to promote your work to the press, how to prepare for interviews with journalists, best practices for effectively communicating your science message, and more.

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Part I: Science and the Media

Science is one of many topics journalists cover, and you may be contacted by a journalist at some point in your career to discuss your new research results or to comment on a new finding in your field. In this section, you'll learn about what kinds of scientific results make it into the news and how you can get the word out to journalists about potentially newsworthy research of your own.

Science journalists

Journalists often contact researchers to ask about new research or a current event. They may want to cover a recently published manuscript, a presentation at a scientific meeting, a comment on a new piece of research the scientist wasn't involved in, or a comment about a current event, such as a natural disaster or new piece of legislation.

Journalists may or may not have a science background or have covered the topic before. It is best to talk to journalists as if they are new to the subject and don't have a science background. They will ask for more detail if they need it.

Today there are fewer and fewer dedicated science journalists. Most newspaper journalists, for example, cover a variety of topics, which can include anything from sports to business news. In today's media landscape, few employers can afford to pay a journalist to cover one beat.

It is critical for you to make yourself aware of how journalists do their jobs and how you can present information in ways that help journalists get the facts right. It's your job to be a marketer, a public speaker, and a translator. A little preparation goes a long way, and with practice you can excel at working with journalists.

AGU's [Sharing Science Program](#) has workshops and webinars to help you improve your skills, and our website has resources to help you prepare for encounters with journalists.

Newsworthy science

The media are interested in covering all sorts of science, including new results, results that go against norms, gee-whiz stories, and more. At the end of the day, all journalists are writing for their audiences. Most journalists write news stories for the nonscience public, not for experts in a particular field, like scientists, doctors, lawyers, or policy makers. To get an editor's approval to write (or record, film, etc.) a story, a journalist needs to be able to "sell" a story idea to their editor, which means they must demonstrate the value of the story to their readers.

What this means is that not every single research project or new finding is of interest to journalists. In fact, much of science doesn't make it into the news. This is perfectly normal and does not mean that a specific project or research topic is not important. It simply means that there isn't a reason for a journalist to write about it at this particular time.

Journalists write stories about things that are new, timely, and significant. When it comes to science, journalists look for research results that

- Are new or previously unknown
- Represent a significant advancement in the field
- Relate to current events (western U.S. drought, New Horizons mission to Pluto, e.g.)
- Might affect our daily lives (sea level rise causing flooding in Miami)
- Go against the current scientific consensus
- Seem quirky, weird, or to defy common sense ([green icebergs](#), [STEVE](#), [speed bumps in space](#))
- Would catch your eye in a newspaper or online
- Include striking photographs or videos



If your research doesn't fit into one of these categories, it may not be newsworthy. Again, this does not mean journalists are passing judgment on your science; it just means the finding may not capture the interest of the journalist's audience. A good test of newsworthiness is the dinner table test: Imagine discussing this new result with friends or family over the dinner table. If you can picture it, the finding is likely newsworthy; if not, it likely won't make it into the news.

Typical news cycle for a story

The news cycle is short. More straightforward news stories might be in the news for only a day or two. Big news stories might last a little longer, as much as a week (or longer in the case of really big stories, including such major natural disasters as the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and subsequent Fukushima nuclear reactor disaster).

Promoting newsworthy research through your press office

Government agencies, universities, funding agencies, and organizations employ professional writers to promote the contributions of their researchers to the media and the public. If you have new results that you think may be newsworthy, engage your press officers. Get in touch early enough to allow your press officers time to prepare. Contact them, for example, when you address minor revisions for a submitted journal article or when your abstract is accepted for a conference. Be sure to tell them about related photos, video, and other multimedia.

Press offices at scientific journals and societies also publicize new research. AGU's public information office publicizes newsworthy research published in AGU's 22 scientific journals and presented at AGU meetings. If you publish research in an AGU journal, contact AGU's public information staff as well as the press officers at your own institution.

Press officers also help journalists looking for scientific experts to interview about emerging news. If you are prepared to comment on current events, such as active natural hazards, resource use, or policy decisions, let your press office know you are available and how to reach you.



Part II: Interviews and Relationships with Journalists

Journalists often reach out to scientists first, but you can also flip the script and call them. Talk to the press officers at your institution to publicize newsworthy research or to learn about preexisting connections and partnerships that your institution may already have with media outlets.

This section will help you prepare for interviews and establish relationships with journalists that can benefit you in the future.

Preparing for an interview

If a journalist calls, first find out who the interviewer is, what outlet they work for, and who the audience is. Ask for their deadline, what the format of the interview will be (e.g., television, radio, phone, email), and whether the interview will be live or recorded. Once you know what format the interview will be in and who you'll be speaking with, you'll need to prepare talking points or messages.

“On the record”

The entire interview—from the moment you answer the phone or enter the room until you hang up or leave (and sometimes beyond)—is “on the record” unless you say otherwise ahead of time. This means that journalists may quote anything you say for a story. In short:

- *On the record*: Anything the source says can be published. The source can be quoted by name.
- *Off the record*: The journalist cannot publish the information.
- *On background/not for attribution*: The journalist can publish the information without the source's name (anonymous). The journalist can use the information but with the source's title or job description only, not the source's name.

To be safe, it's a best practice to always assume that you're on the record.

Preparing your messages

When speaking with journalists, chop up your messages, or talking points, into four key elements: the news, impact, context, and take-home.

News

The news conveys the basic facts: who, what, when, where, why, and how. You and your colleagues conducted a study through various methods and produced a result. The news should tell the journalists who you are, what you did, how and why you did it, and what you found. What you found should tell journalists what is unique—what is the new piece of information you've learned?

When sharing your new results, remember to be as specific as possible and include numbers. For example, if you found that glaciers in Antarctica are retreating faster than ever before, specify how much faster than before: How fast are they retreating now, and how fast did scientists suspect they were retreating before your study? Or, if you found that wildfires are occurring more frequently in the American West, how much more frequently are they occurring?

Impact

The impact conveys the implications of your work. It tells journalists why your results are interesting or significant. It answers the questions: Why does the new information matter? Why should someone care about this result?

When discussing the impact of your work, describe what the result changes, who is affected by it, and why this result is interesting. The impact should have a human

dimension as well: Show how your work relates to the everyday life of the average person or fits into the reader's interests or values.

As with the news, with impact it is also important to be specific. For example, quantify how many people would be affected or how much money would be lost. Here is an example of a researcher describing the impact of a potential Mississippi River megaflood:

"If that happened, it would directly affect the lives of nearly two million Americans as well as the multi-trillion-dollar petrol chemical assets along the lower Mississippi River." - Yi-Jun Xu

Context

The context of your work provides a general perspective or frame of reference for the new results. The context could include a historical perspective or how your result relates to other events happening in the news. The context should answer the question: How does this result compare to what was already known? The context could also describe what is normal about this result or what is surprising about it. When providing context, think about this: Was this the result I expected to get? Does this confirm previous results or perhaps go against the current consensus on this topic?

Here is an example of context provided by a researcher describing the effects of Hurricane Maria on Puerto Rico in 2017:

"Maria is more extreme in its precipitation than anything else that the island has ever seen. I just didn't expect that it was going to be so much more than anything else that's happened in the last 60 years." – David Keelings

Take-home

The take-home message is a synthesis of the news, impact, and context of your work. It answers the question: What does all this mean? To prepare a take-home message, think about the one or two things you want journalists to take away from your presentation and summarize them in an engaging way. Here are a few examples:

Researcher describing the increasing effects of climate change on the Arctic:

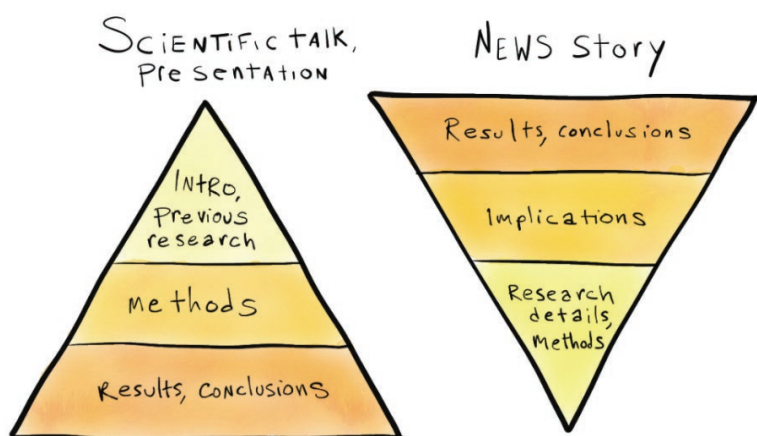
"Ten years ago, the Arctic was whispering. Now, it's screaming."

Researcher describing a mechanism of tornado formation that contradicts popular thought:

"You are not going to really ever be finding strong evidence of a tornado descending, so we need to stop making that a priority in our forecasting strategies."

Researcher describing future health impacts of wildfires becoming more frequent:

"Our exposure to wildfire smoke is only going to get worse going into the next century, so we need to plan and be prepared in terms of acting to protect population health."



Structure of a science talk or manuscript versus the structure of a news story.
Credit: Olivia V. Ambrogio

How to share your message

Your message should contain the main thoughts that you want to share during the interview. Here are a few steps you can follow to craft your message even further:

1. *Tell a story.* Storytelling is a powerful and effective tool that scientists can use to talk about their work. Human brains are hardwired to connect to stories. Research has shown that people's brains light up more for narratives than for listings of facts. They also retain the information better and longer.

Stories are also simple. They have a beginning, a middle, and an end. You don't need to be Stephen King or J. K. Rowling to tell a good story—you just need practice.

Here are four narrative themes that lend themselves well to science tales:

- *Journey*—A journey is a story about travel. Voyaging to Antarctica to study glaciers, or to Chile to look at earthquakes, or even performing fieldwork within range of home are science journeys.
- *Quest*—Similar to a journey, a quest is about seeking answers, something all researchers do. In a quest story, make sure to include the trials and triumphs that occurred along the way to a new discovery.
- *Mystery*—Science and mystery naturally go together. Think about all the science-based dramas on television, such as CSI. Crafting a story about studying ice cores to reveal clues about Earth's atmospheric history is an example.
- *Stranger comes to town*—This is when someone, or something, unexpected enters the scene. This can be similar to a mystery but is based on a specific event. Examples of science strangers include a tsunami or a destructive superstorm.

[For more tips on telling good stories, check out this Eos news article.](#)

2. *Watch your words.* Use plain language and avoid jargon. Jargon is the specialized language that experts use to communicate with others in their field. There are different types of jargon, including technical terms, abbreviations, and acronyms that only those within the field are familiar with, and words that have multiple meanings. These are words that have one meaning within your field and a more common meaning otherwise, like “model” or “mean.” Scientists should be aware of all types of jargon and spend time thinking about simple and clear terms they can use in place of jargon.



Use words anyone can understand. If you must use a technical term or an acronym, define it, and don't introduce more than one or two technical terms or acronyms in any one discussion. Reducing jargon is not "dumbing down" your science; it's using simple, clear terms that anyone can understand. For example, say "human-caused" instead of "anthropogenic," and say "carbon dioxide" instead of "CO₂."

Keep in mind that your audience's only experience with science might be high school biology. Be sure to include anecdotes and metaphors.

You can also use social math, that is, describing a value using a common object of known size in place of hard numbers. Social math can make intangible sums more tangible for readers. Here is an example from nasa.gov of the Saturn V rocket, which took astronauts to the Moon, described using social math:

"The Saturn V rocket was 111 meters (363 feet) tall, about the height of a 36-story-tall building, and 18 meters (60 feet) taller than the Statue of Liberty. Fully fueled for liftoff, the Saturn V weighed 2.8 million kilograms (6.2 million pounds), the weight of about 400 elephants."

The [measure of things](#) is an online tool that can help you find social math comparisons for various quantities.

3. Fine-tune your message. Once you've written (and perhaps rewritten) your main messages, read them aloud to a friend. Ask the friend to point out any jargon that you may have missed. Also ask them, "Does this make sense?" Then finalize your messages. Practice saying them out loud until you can repeat them on demand, but avoid memorizing them word for word.

It may also be helpful to craft a sound bite. A sound bite is a clever phrase that artfully summarizes a thought. Sound bites are the 5- to 10-second clips that appear in TV and radio interviews, or the one-sentence quotes that appear in stories. Often they are extracted from a longer interview. A sound bite that appears in a story might be something that was said off the cuff or a prepared thought carefully crafted before an interview.

The [Share your science in the news](#) section of AGU's Sharing Science website has a number of tools to help you prepare. Specifically, you can download and print a copy of AGU's [Message worksheet](#) to help you develop your "take-home" messages—the key points you want to emphasize and reiterate during an interview.

Discussing uncertainty

Uncertainty doesn't necessarily mean that the science is unsettled, but it's sometimes difficult to get this message across to journalists. As TV meteorologist and AGU blogger Dan Satterfield says, "Tell them what you know and not what you don't know." Use phrases like, "The best science we have tells us..." or "Our research tells us the most likely reason is...."

Avoid phrases that imply doubt, such as "we think" and "it could be." Often the science is settled even if there isn't 100% consensus. Focus on the consensus and not on outliers. Focus on relevant findings and not on what is still unknown.

Remember: To the nonscience public, the word uncertainty means "unknown." To scientists, however, uncertainty means "known to the nth degree." Read [Certainty vs. Uncertainty: Understanding Scientific Terms About Climate Change](#) on the Union of Concerned Scientists website for more thoughts on discussing uncertainty.

Responding to journalists

Journalists are often working on a short turnaround and need information as soon as they can get it. The news cycle is very fast. You might have only minutes or hours, not days,



to get back to them. There are a handful of mutually beneficial things you can do when a journalist calls or emails:

- *Gather your thoughts*—If a journalist calls you out of the blue and you need some time to collect your thoughts, ask whether you can call them back. Be respectful of their time, and respond when you say you will.
- *Be timely*—Always ask journalists when their deadlines are. Make sure to get back to them in plenty of time so that they can include your information in their stories before they send them off to their editors.
- *Ask questions*—It is okay to ask a journalist what their story is about. This will help you provide answers that are in context.
- *Suggest other sources*—Provide journalists with other sources who can provide comments or offer supplemental information.
- *Offer visuals, audio, or other multimedia*—If you have photos or videos from the field and you own the copyrights, offer them to journalists to use.

Accordingly, if you know you're about to send out a press release or participate in a press conference, you must prepare to respond to journalists' inquiries as soon as possible. Set aside time on your calendar to be available to journalists after the release goes out. Prepare your notes so that you can return their phone calls and emails right away.

For one scientist's experience with this, read "[You can hide under your desk...as long as you still answer the phone](#)" by Kat Compton on The Plainspoken Scientist, AGU's science communications blog.

Interview logistics

Phone: If you're doing an interview by phone, find a quiet room to use and put a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door. Have your notes in front of you during the call so you can use them as a reference. Whenever possible, use a landline phone for better call quality. (You wouldn't want to lose your cell phone signal in the middle of a live radio interview.) And turn off your cell phone ringer.

Radio: If you're doing a radio interview, practice delivering your messages over the phone to a friend before the interview. Can your friend hear you clearly? Are you speaking too fast or too slow? Too loud? Too softly? Also, try standing up and smiling while you're on the phone. Often your posture and gestures come through over the phone.



TV: If you're doing a TV interview, practice delivering your message before a mirror. Take note of any strange facial expressions you make. Aim to be animated, but avoid flailing your arms. Also, wear plain clothes and basic makeup. Avoid wearing stripes, which don't show well on TV. Avoid wearing green, too, in case they want to use a green screen to superimpose a background behind you.

Email: Most journalists prefer to talk via phone or in person when conducting an interview; however, interviews via email are a possibility. The biggest thing to keep in mind is time. Respond to questions in a timely manner, and be as clear and concise as possible.

Establishing and nurturing successful long-term relationships with journalists

The best way to start a successful relationship with a journalist is to be a good source if and when you work with them. To stay connected in the long term (or to initiate a connection), let the journalist know when you have a new paper coming out. Or invite them to visit your lab or go out for a cup of coffee. Also, let the journalist know that you are available to comment on stories about other research. Last, you can also contact them about new things going on in your field that might be unrelated to your research. This is invaluable for journalists, who often have to come up with story ideas on their own.

Pitching a story to a journalist

If you have [newsworthy research](#) or findings you believe would be of interest to journalists, you can pitch the story to them. If you are on familiar terms with a journalist, feel free to call or email them, but be sure to let your press office know before you reach out, especially if you are working together on a press release. You don't want to undermine the press office's work.

Journalists write stories that they think will be of interest to readers, so if you're thinking of pitching a story to a journalist, take a few minutes first to think about what will be of interest to their audience and be sure to mention that in your pitch.

Be respectful of the journalist's time, and be prepared before you call. Have a brief summary of the news ready to share. Be sure to answer these two questions in your summary: "What is the news?" and "Why should the journalist and their readers care?" If you can answer these questions, a journalist should be able to tell you within a minute of chatting whether they are interested.

If you are not on familiar terms with any journalists, contact your press office. Or you can always contact AGU's public information office at news@agu.org. These offices can help you determine whether your results are newsworthy and also work with you to find the best way to share the news with the press. This might mean issuing a press release, writing a blog post, calling a journalist your press officer knows, sharing the news on social media, organizing a press conference, or more.

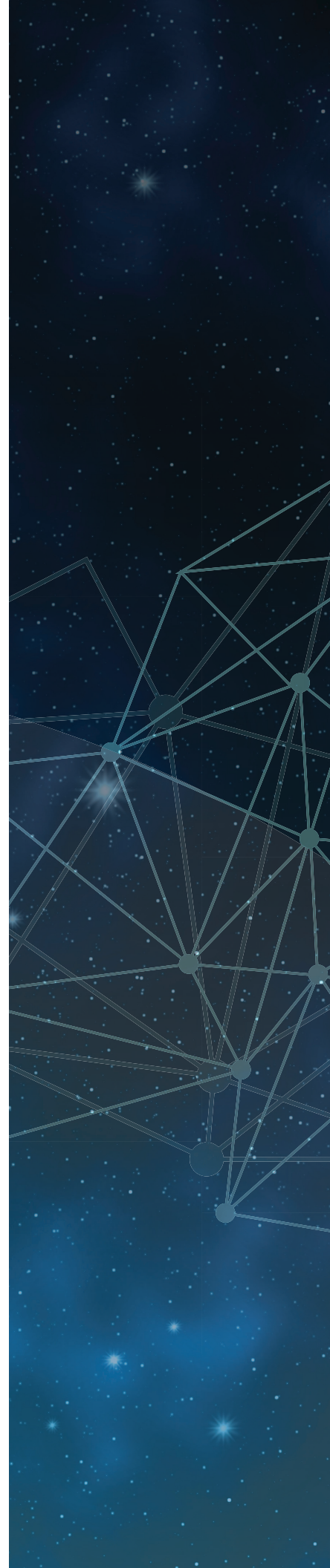
For more information on working with your press office and issuing press releases, visit the [Share your science in the news](#) page on the Sharing Science website.

Part III: Tips for Success and Rules of Thumb

Effectively communicating your science to a lay audience is a skill, like any other, that must be developed over time. Here are a few tips for success and rules of thumb that will help hone your communication skills and ensure you get the most out of the experience.

Practice for an interview

The best way to become proficient in anything is to practice and gain experience over time. Always prepare your main messages—the two or three points that you want a journalist to take away from your discussion—before any interview.



People can sometimes draw different conclusions from scientific results. When preparing your messages ahead of time, think about ways someone could inadvertently misinterpret your results or draw false conclusions, and revise your messages accordingly.

Some scientific topics can be controversial, so when preparing your main messages, think about parts of those messages that might be contentious and how you would respond to questions about them. And remember: You don't have to respond to anything you don't want to.

Once you've prepared your messages, practice the interview with someone who does not have a science background, such as a friend or spouse. This will help minimize your chances of being caught off guard and ensure you're explaining the science in clear, understandable terms.

During this role-play, have the other person ask you basic or obvious questions and practice giving your answers. Then ask the person for feedback. Were you clear and concise? Were you eloquent, or did you stumble over your words? Were there any parts of your science your friend did not understand? Do they comprehend your message? Were any parts of your results misinterpreted?

Then ask the other person to imitate a heavy-hitting journalist and take a crack at answering some really tough questions. Solicit their feedback on your responses, ability to stay in control, and ability to transition from tough questions. More likely than not, your colleague will be a tougher interviewer than an actual journalist.

Anticipate questions and use transitions

Anticipate the kinds of questions a journalist might ask you, and practice answering them. If a question takes you by surprise, take a moment to think about your answer before you speak.

In general, when answering questions from the press, tell them what you know. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't answer it! Instead, offer to follow up with more information or recommend another expert who can answer the question. For example, you could say, "I don't know the answer to your question, but I can find out and get back to you soon," or "I don't know, but I can put you in touch with someone who does," or "That's beyond my area of expertise, but what I can tell you is...."

It's always better to say "I don't know" rather than "No comment," because the latter phrase implies you may be hiding something. You can always refer the journalist to another scientist or promise to follow up with more information instead of saying something inaccurate that they might then use in a story.

Journalists may ask questions that are off topic or outside your area of expertise, and while this doesn't happen often, it's best to be prepared. In these instances, use transition statements to shift the conversation back to what you know. For example, you could say, "Our research didn't look at that, but what we did find is this," and repeat your main messages.

If you're discussing a topic that's controversial, it's best not to wade deeper into the controversy; focus instead on what you know and bridge back to the main messages from your research.

Ask and repeat

Scientists often wonder whether journalists are understanding what they're saying, and the best way to know is to ask. If you just explained a nuanced yet critical concept, ask the journalist, "Did that make sense?" Or ask them to repeat back to you what you said. If they didn't get it right, politely let the journalist know, and try to explain it in a different way. Help journalists get details right. You can also offer to be available after the interview



to clarify any points or answer any follow-up questions. It's also acceptable to send a journalist an email after the fact repeating and summarizing your messages.

Don't hesitate to repeat your main points multiple times. Communicating in simple, repeated messages is not a natural skill for many scientists, but it is a critical skill for any speaker. Often audiences need to hear ideas repeated before they will remember them. You may not like repeating the same things over and over, but repetition is an effective way to get an idea to stick.

Keep calm and carry on

No matter what pitfalls you encounter, always remember to keep your cool. If a journalist asks you a difficult question, pause for a moment and think before you answer. Take a breath if you need one. Don't worry; the journalist will wait if they really want a question answered. If you're really stumbling, ask the journalist whether you can call them back, and then take time to prepare what you'd like to say.

Ask for help

Don't forget that it's always okay to ask for help. Your institution's press office, as well as the press office at AGU, is available to help you prepare for an interview. The office can help you develop your main messages, role-play, and anticipate any difficult or contentious issues. Press officers have relationships with many science journalists, so they can make introductions to journalists and vet any journalists from outlets you are wary of. Reach out to the press office at your institution or at AGU or another society, or to the journal you're publishing research in, if you have any questions or would like help preparing for an interview.

Rules of thumb

There is no acknowledgments section

Unlike in scientific papers, news stories have no acknowledgments section, and journalists rarely include citations or references to funding agencies. Journalists focus on explaining the science, not clarifying the contributions of each member of the research team. This can be hard for scientists to swallow because they are trained to give credit where credit is due, but remember, a journalist's audience is interested in the facts, not who gathered them. There are some exceptions to this rule—for example, if a study was funded by a group with a vested interest in the outcome—but it is generally true.



If you feel strongly about giving others credit, mention them during the interview using such phrases as “We built upon earlier work by Dr. John Smith, who was the first to find that the Earth is not flat. We’ve now shown definitively that it is actually round.” Or, “My colleagues Jane Doe, John Smith, and I found...” or “I built off of Jane Doe’s original findings to determine conclusively that the Earth is round and not flat, as was previously assumed.” There is no guarantee that a journalist will include this credit information, but it improves the odds.

Another way to give your colleagues credit is to recommend that the journalist interview them as well. For example, you could say, “While I analyzed the data, my colleague Jane Doe did much of the fieldwork on this study, so she could tell you more about how the data were collected.”

The least effective method of giving others credit is to include a laundry list of previously published papers and funding information, which may be useful to a journalist seeking background information but will likely not make it into a story.

You can’t review a story before it’s published

Journalists protect their integrity by not allowing sources to review their stories before they go to print or are published online. This comes from the idea of a free press: The journalist is an impartial observer who merely reports facts and doesn’t let sources influence what they write. This is an industry standard, and it does not mean that the journalist does not trust you. So don’t let it bother you.

If you’ve made an effort to be clear and concise, you’ve asked the interviewer whether you’ve made sense, and you’ve offered to be available for further questions, then you’ve done all you can to minimize the chances of something inaccurate making it into a story.

Mistakes happen

That being said, mistakes do occasionally happen. Journalists strive to be accurate in their reporting, but nothing works perfectly 100% of the time.

If you find that a journalist has gotten the science wrong in an article, inform them, in a polite way, of the mistake. The publication might wish to publish a correction. Often these are honest mistakes due to miscommunication of the science, not attempts by the journalist to distort your results.

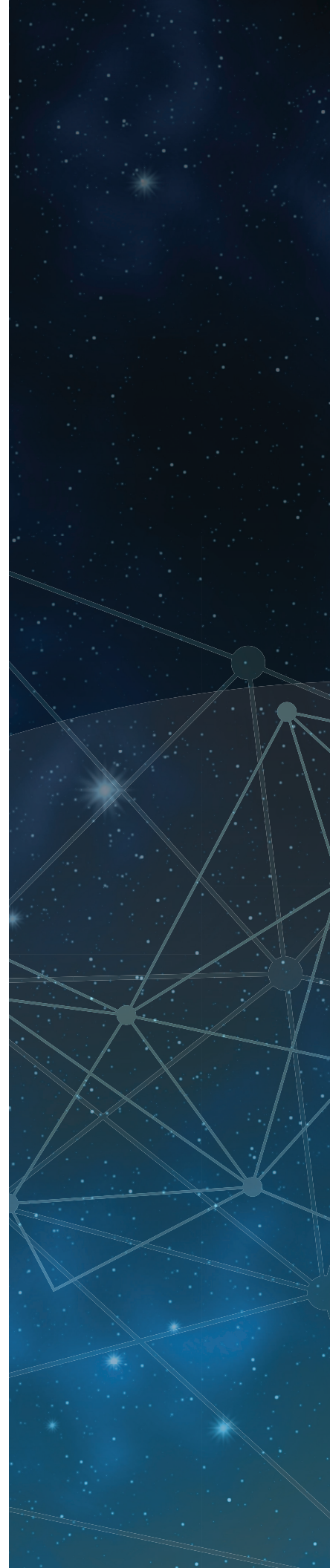
So how can you, the scientist, minimize the chance of inaccuracies in stories? The answer is simple: Be a part of the process! Do all of the things we’ve covered so far in this guide: Work with your institution’s press office when you have a potentially newsworthy study coming out, establish relationships with trusted journalists, prepare your messages ahead of time, and be as clear as possible in your communication.

Working with your institution’s press office to publicize a study lets you participate in the process of crafting a press release or in the publicity. For many studies, the press release is often the first thing journalists read, so any inaccuracies in the press release can be repeated or amplified in subsequent news stories. But working with the press office to ensure the message is accurate will minimize these effects.

Ultimately, when it comes to accuracy, the onus is on you. Think carefully about the words you use and the information you share. The more jargon you use, the more you increase the odds of being misunderstood. If a journalist can’t understand you, they are more likely to unwittingly share inaccurate information. Use clear, simple language, and repeat important points often.

Accept artistic license

As was mentioned above, if something is factually inaccurate in a journalist’s story, certainly bring it to the journalist’s attention. But remember that journalists are writing



for their audiences, and they may write things differently than you, the scientist, would, whether to make the science more accessible, entertaining, or relatable. Your job is to communicate facts; the journalist's job is to make them interesting to readers.

If a story is scientifically accurate but simply written differently than how you would write it, accept that the journalist is telling your story in their voice and leave it at that.

Part IV: Resources and More Information

Sharing Science program

Find tools, resources, and opportunities to share your science in the news, with policy makers, and more. Learn to craft an elevator pitch, write an op-ed, or be a science expert.

AGU Newsroom

Read AGU press releases for a good sense of how science news stories are structured and what kinds of results make it into the news; contact AGU's public information office staff, who can publicize your work or connect you with journalists looking for experts in a specific topic area.

Sharing Science webinars on YouTube

Take a deep dive into messaging for the media, avoiding jargon, sharing science using multimedia, and more.

American Association for the Advancement of Science Mass Media Fellowship

Try your hand at science journalism with this 10-week summer fellowship at a respected news outlet.



