Messaging Templates

Knowing your main messages ahead of time will help reporters relay what's most important, and having a formula for developing those messages will help you communicate them clearly. The two examples below show good ways to discuss 1 important new research findings and 2 scientific findings that suggest specific actions people and institutions should take.

1

The basic science:
Hard-to-predict solar storms can release radiation that hits Earth and the satellites we have in orbit.

Major findings and results of new research:
Our new modeling techniques better calculate the time between events on the sun and the arrival of radiation here on Earth.

Implications for scientists or society:
When a solar storm occurs, satellite operators will now have more time to protect the communications networks everyone relies on, such as the Global Positioning System.

2

The problem:
People find it difficult to get enough exercise, and public health is suffering as a result.

The solution:
We found that workplace incentive programs are the most effective way to get people to exercise regularly.

Action that should be taken:
Health insurance companies and government agencies need to make it easier for businesses to adopt workplace incentive programs.

Benefits from taking action:
Healthier workers are more productive and spend less money on health care.

Interview Checklist

When you receive or solicit an interview request, here are important questions you should ask the journalist:

- What news outlet do you work for?
- Who is your audience?
- What is your deadline?
- What is your angle for this story?
- Who else have you talked to?
- Is the interview live, or taped and edited? (for broadcast interviews)

The best interviews come when you've had a lot of time to prepare. But even taking 15 minutes to prepare the following can have huge benefits:

- Main messages
- Memorable quotes
- Examples your audience can relate to—include local references and references to people's everyday lives

If you have time, practice your quotes on colleagues, friends, or family members. Now go and have a great interview!

Praise for *A Scientist's Guide to Talking with the Media: Practical Advice from the Union of Concerned Scientists*

"This book is essential medicine for the pandemic of scientific illiteracy."

—Leon Lederman, 1988 Nobel Prize in Physics

"This superbly organized and well-written primer guides scientists through the process of talking to the public through the media."

—Book review, *Science*, June 2007

"This is an invaluable guide for scientists seeking to learn how to better communicate with—and through—the media."

—Deborah Blum, 1992 Pulitzer Prize-winning science journalist

Where can I get a copy?

Copies of the book *A Scientist's Guide to Talking with the Media* are available for purchase at *www.ucsusa.org/ScientistsGuide*. Learn how you can get involved with UCS at *www.ucsusa.org/sciencenetwork*.

Union of Concerned Scientists
Citizens and Scientists for Environmental Solutions

National Headquarters
Two Brattle Square
Cambridge, MA 02138-3780
Phone: (617) 547-5552
Fax: (617) 864-9405

West Coast Office
2397 Shattuck Ave., Ste. 203
Berkeley, CA 94704-1567
Phone: (510) 843-1872
Fax: (510) 843-3785

Washington, DC, Office
1825 K St. NW, Ste. 800
Washington, DC 20006-1232
Phone: (202) 223-6133
Fax: (202) 223-6162

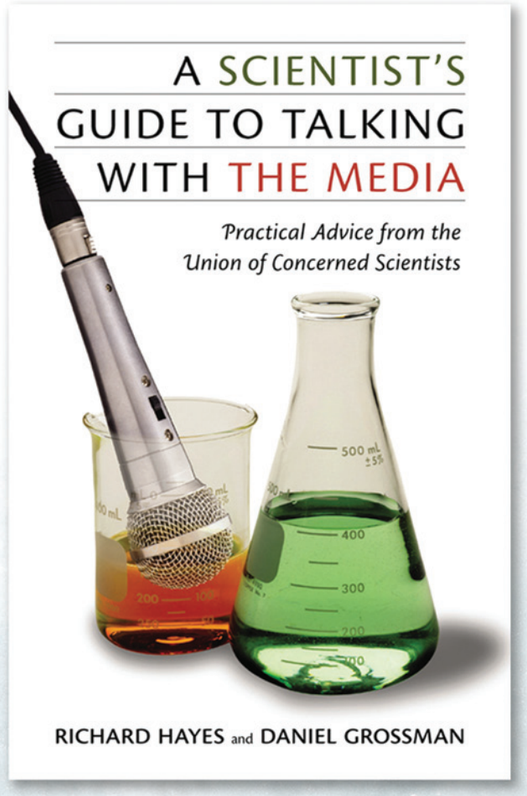
Midwest Office
One N. LaSalle St., Ste. 1904
Chicago, IL 60602-4064
Phone: (312) 578-1750
Fax: (312) 578-1751

Web: www.ucsusa.org
Email: ucs@ucsusa.org

A Scientist's Guide to Talking with the Media

Desk Reference

Based on the book by Richard Hayes and Daniel Grossman



Union of Concerned Scientists





"One hallmark of intellect is the ability to simplify, to make the complex easy to understand. Anyone can be unclear."

—Paula LaRocque, *Dallas Morning News* editor

The Disconnect between Scientists, Media, and the Public

The public has great trust in scientists, and scientists have many opportunities to communicate their work to the public through the media. But too often, scientists and journalists fail to communicate effectively with one another. Why? Scientists are accustomed to communicating primarily with their colleagues, while journalists speak to the masses.

Recently, journalists have been forced to adapt to a never-ending news cycle, and fewer media outlets support dedicated science coverage. Therefore, it is more important than ever for scientists to communicate their work in a way journalists (and the public) can understand.

Craft Your Main Messages

Preparation makes interviews more successful. Take time before responding to an interview request to distill your ideas down to the three or four most important messages you want to communicate. (See the other side of this brochure for sample messaging templates.)

Journalists can only convey a few points in an article, so make them count. Your messages should be clear, concise, and easily understood by a mass audience. No matter how complicated a topic is, you have the power to decide which aspects of it are the most important to highlight.

Know Your Audience

Most reporters still write for general audiences. Even a journalist familiar with your field is ultimately writing for people who know little to nothing about a given issue. Therefore, it is important to remember that even when you are talking to a journalist, the most important audience is the people who will be reading, watching, or listening to the journalist's story.

Ask yourself: Why should people care about this research? How does it affect people's lives? What aspects of the research will resonate with the specific audience (business sector, city, demographic group, etc.) served by this journalist?

93 Percentage of Americans who say scientists contribute to society's well-being[1]

Watch Out for Problem Words

Scientists and scientific disciplines have their own language, which often includes words and phrases that will either be unfamiliar to the general public or have a very different meaning. For instance, scientists understand a *theory* to be a description of how something works, but to most people, a theory is an unproven idea.

Be aware of these language pitfalls and consider ways of breaking down what you mean in a way people can understand, particularly through metaphors or analogies. If you feel you need to use technical language, explain what you mean before or after you use the technical word or phrase.

[1] Pew Research Center for the People and the Press/AAAS (July 2009)

3 Percentage of scientists who say they often talk to reporters[2]

Prepare Memorable Quotes

Rather than talk "off the cuff" and hope reporters quote you accurately, you can ensure that happens by planning your quotes in advance. Memorable quotes—what journalists call sound bites—help reporters convey your findings and opinions in a simple, punchy way. There are many types of effective sound bites, but the most common put research in perspective: "For the first time, we've found evidence that . . ." Other sound bites paint a picture, such as a geologist comparing a volcanic eruption to "smashing a champagne bottle instead of popping the cork."

Journalists also want to know how you feel about your work. One researcher said his "jaw just dropped" when he found evidence of global warming in Antarctica. Good sound bites include analogies and metaphors, quotes that put numbers in perspective, witty quips, and references to pop culture.

Stay "On Message"

If you're a college professor answering a student's question or talking with a colleague at a scientific conference, you are usually more than happy to delve into complicated details that take a while to explain. But when a reporter asks you a question in an interview, time is precious. Therefore, it's best to focus on a few points, take control of the interview, and make sure the reporter hears your most important messages.

"Staying out of the fray is not taking the high ground; it is just passing the buck."

—Stephen Schneider, Stanford University

Also remember that everything you say is on the record and can be quoted, so make sure you don't let yourself get "off message." For scientists, this usually happens when you overwhelm a journalist with details that won't make it into the final story and drown out the main points you wanted to convey.

Be Ready for Bad Questions

Have you ever been misquoted? To ensure you are quoted accurately, you need to not only prepare your sound bites in advance but also avoid answering poorly premised or off-topic questions. Don't dodge such a question; just answer it quickly and get back to your main messages. For example, you can say, "I see where you're going with that question, but what's really important here is . . ." or "That's not my particular field of expertise, but what I can tell you is . . ." or "That wasn't the focus of our research; what we found is . . ." If a journalist persists with tangential lines of questioning, you might suggest other people who can answer those questions.

1.7 Percentage of total news coverage focusing on science and technology[3]

[2] Pew Research Center for the People and the Press/AAAS (July 2009)

[3] Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism (March 2011)