

Science Stories

Interviewing



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Before You Interview

- Do your homework: Read the paper and any background materials (ask scientists for suggestions). Even if you don't fully understand the paper, you should know enough to ask intelligent questions.
- Find authors: Determine the best study authors to contact
- Find outside experts: Determine the best people to comment on a study. Beware of conflicts of interest. Send them the paper beforehand.
- Prepare questions
- Be sure to give yourself plenty of time to contact sources!



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Interviewing Etiquette

- Never interview by e-mail unless absolutely necessary. You'll get stilted answers, and it's harder to ask follow-up questions or go off on tangents.

ex. "The effects of the polymorphism may be greater than these results indicate" (from a story about adultery)

ex. "'It's very sweet. When they're doing this singing thing, they're reaching their legs across to the other one, trying to play footsies.'" (from a story about mosquito mating)

- Always address scientists and doctors as "Dr." unless given permission to do otherwise
- Always keep in mind that these people (especially the outside sources) are giving up valuable time to speak to you. Keep your questions relevant and the interviews as short as possible. Don't waste their time with questions like, "Walk me through this study"—unless you don't understand it at all. Home in on what's important, what you don't know, and what you need to make the story compelling (good color, good quotes, etc.) Thank them for their time!



Interviewing

Interviewing Tips

- Set the interviewee at ease: Start out with some general questions about their work, make it clear that you've done your homework, sound excited about the study
 - Ask simple questions if you want simple answers. Play dumb.
 - If your source starts using jargon, stop them. Ask them to rephrase in a way that will make sense to your readers. Always be thinking about what quotes you're going to use in a story. If nothing else works, try rephrasing their words back to them. (David Favre 4:17 – 5:37)
 - Play devil's advocate
 - Don't interrupt. You may miss some juicy stuff. Let the interview go beyond the scope of your questions. There's a story everywhere.
 - Avoid questions with “yes” and “no” answers. (Not: “Was the study difficult?”; Rather: “What was the hardest part of the study?”)
 - Save the hardest / most controversial questions till last. You don't want to shut the interview down early.
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On the Record?

On the Record: The source agrees that anything said during the interview can be printed, and the source's name can be used. “We've had a lean budget year,” says Francis Collins, head of NIH.

Off the Record: The information cannot be published in any form.

On Background: The information can be used in a story—and can even be run as a quote—but the source cannot be identified by name. “We're going to have a cancel a number of projects because of the lean budget,” an NIH administrator says.



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Best Questions for Authors

- Ask them to explain any parts of the study you didn't understand
- Ask them why they think the study's important, why it advances the field, how it builds on other research
- Ask them what they thought was most cool or most exciting about the work
- Ask questions your readers will ask: Why should I care? What are the potential applications?
- Anything else I should ask? Anything you haven't been asked?
- Ask for color
- Ask for art and multimedia
- (Ask for outside experts)



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Best Questions for Outside Experts

- Is this a solid study? What are its strengths? What are its flaws?
- Does it advance the field? Is the advance likely to be of interest to anyone beyond specialists?
- What did you find most cool or exciting about the work?
- Who else should I contact?



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Interviewing Pitfalls

- On background? Off-the record? Discuss the ground rules. Or conduct the interview and then tell them what you'd like to use afterwards.
- See the story before publication? Depends on you and your outlet. At the very least, you may want to pass complicated passages by them.
- Can you use quotes from secondary sources (press releases, newspapers, podcasts, etc.)?



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Postscript

- Call sources back if necessary. It's better to be accurate than to worry about bothering them.
- Send copies of your stories to particularly helpful sources.
- Keep up good relationships and sources. You never know when you're going to need them again.
- At the end of the interview, ask the subject if there is anything that you forgot to ask; ie, is there anything that he/she would have liked to say that they didn't get a chance to, or that you should have asked but didn't think to ask.



Science Stories

Quotes



Science Stories

Quotes

Good Quotes

- “Summarize what’s on a speaker’s mind, crystallize an emotion or attitude, or offer an individual perspective of some sort—preferably in a concise and interesting way.” (AP Guide to Newswriting)
- “The more quotes resemble dialogue, the livelier they are.” (AP Guide to Newswriting)



Science Stories

Quotes

Good Quotes

- Give a sense of the speaker's **personality**



Science Stories

Quotes

Good Quotes

- Give a sense of the speaker's **personality**

Once you have the number of tropical arthropods, you've counted the biggest chunk of living things on Earth, if you leave out the bacteria. "Plants and mammals—woody things and floppy things and all that—they're just a small addition," says Hamilton.



Science Stories

Quotes

Good Quotes

- Give a sense of the speaker's **personality**

And don't even get Heroes writer Aron Coleite started on invisibility. In a scene from the first season of the show, two invisible men walked down a Manhattan street, bumping into people and things as they went; one steals a pretzel from a cart. "Hollywood is not very glamorous," says Coleite. "We spend hours in a stinking room arguing about invisibility."

Science Stories

Quotes

Good Quotes

- Add **color** to a story



Science Stories

Quotes

Good Quotes

- Add **color** to a story

But snakes obviously slither along twig-free surfaces, too. For example, the snakes used in this study are champs at escaping across office carpet, says David Hu, a mechanical engineer at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta and lead author of the paper published today in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. "One snake escaped, and we didn't know where it was until we got a printer jam," he says. (The snake was fine.)



Science Stories

Quotes

Good Quotes

- Add **color** to a story

Penguin biologist Phil Trathan and cartographer Peter Fretwell, both of the British Antarctic Survey, wondered if it was possible to do better by tracking the penguins from space. The birds themselves don't show up in satellite pictures; their black-and-white bodies are too similar to the white ice with black shadows. Not so with guano. "The poo just sort of stands out at you," says Trathan. Emperors are the only penguins that breed on the sea ice, so he knows who's doing the pooping.



Science Stories

Quotes

Good Quotes

- Sound better than a paraphrase



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Good Quotes

- Sound better than a paraphrase

"My mouth was kind of hanging open as I was reading," says developmental biologist Janet Werker.

Not: *Developmental psychologist Janet Werker says this is a good study.*



Science Stories

Quotes

Good Quotes

- Sound better than a paraphrase

“You do have to watch your fingers, though, when you've got a piranha and it's flipping around on the ground,” says Dahdul.

Not: *The researchers took care not to get bitten.*



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When Not to Quote

- Not everything someone says is worth quoting.

Redundant: *The drug cured cancer in 50% of the mice. “It worked on half of the mice,” says biologist Jane Doe.*

Bland: *“The findings are statistically significant.” “It’s a really interesting study.” “Then we injected the mice with 40 milliliters of water.”*



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Tips

- **Never change a quote.**
- Use ellipses to **shorten long quotes**, or break them up with attribution. *“It’s a really cool study. The data are statistically significant, and I liked the figures in the paper. It’s gong to transform the field.”* → *“It’s a really cool study... It’s going to transform the field.”* or *“It’s a really cool study,” says Dr. Smith. “It’s going to transform the field.”*
- If you **paraphrase** someone, be sure your paraphrase is accurate. Run it by the author during the interview, or send her an e-mail. *Author: “75% of cats and 80% dogs are spayed and neutered, while only 25% of lizards and 10% of hamsters are,” says Dr. Smith. You: “Would it be fair to say that people tend to spay and neuter large pets but not small ones?” Author: “Yes.” You write: People tend to spay and neuter their large pets but not their small ones, says Dr. Smith.*