



## 14 Tips for Talking to Reporters

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We are often asked how to address concerns about news articles that someone considers less than adequate in content and approach. We find that most issue-oriented people do not understand the process of news reporting or the organization of a newsroom that begins with a news item and ends with the production of a newspaper or news broadcast.

In response, we explain that the nature of news work, the technicalities of the print and broadcast media, and the characteristics, needs, and expectations of their audience impose special demands and restraints on journalists.

During the course of a conversation, we offer the following suggestions.

1. Before contacting the reporter, ask yourself whether the information in the story is satisfactory for the intended readers and substantially complete, or whether the facts are incorrect enough to cause real harm if not corrected. Don't sweat the small stuff. Choose your battles.

2. Know that journalists are not writing for specialists, but for a general audience that does not need (nor necessarily understands) complex scientific and technical information. As a result, they must simplify the information. From your perspective, the result may be an incomplete or inaccurate story.

3. Try to reach a reporter by phone before sending a letter or email. A friendly "live" conversation will be more memorable to the reporter and less likely to offend than an impersonal letter or email. At the end of the conversation, offer to send additional information or a recap of the discussion, and do so promptly. Attach your business card so that you get into his/her Rolodex.

4. Be polite, informed, and brief. Explain that you have a different or additional perspective from the one expressed in the article, and present it in the fewest possible words.

5. Understand that the article may not have run exactly as the reporter

wrote it. Because of time or space constraints or because of the press of other news, the original story may have been edited, revised, and/or shortened by others without the reporter's knowledge or final approval. Also, reporters do not write the headlines or decide on pull-quotes, nor the play (where the story appears on the page or within a newscast). Reporters are often frustrated that changes by others weaken or distort the presentation and/or content.

6. Ask questions. Phrase your response as a question rather than as a challenge or statement:

- Ask where the reporter got a particular piece of information with which you disagree.

- Ask him/her to send a copy of the source to you.

- Ask why he/she relied on a certain source, but didn't contact another. How did he/she get the information? Offer to send background information on the person or group on which relied (if you have it), and information on more reliable sources from your perspective.

- Ask if he/she knows about research that points in a direction different from the one taken in the article.

7. Volunteer to be an informal advisor to the reporter in the future: "Please call me if you address this or related topics again in the future. I can probably help with fact checking or put you in touch with someone who would be a good source." And then be available to do so.

8. Keep in mind that journalists are educated to be accurate, balanced and

fair, and to adhere to such ethical standards as those of the Society of Professional Journalists.

9. Assume that the reporter knows all aspects of the issue. He/she may believe the debate is a duel between the forces of good and evil, and articles often transmit this message. Inform him/her that debate is taking place inside the scientific, business, government, and environmental sectors on most environmental issues. On many issues, there is disagreement among environmentalists, as well as among scientists and other groups.

10. Assume that the reporter will

be open to new information. But know that he/she will check all information thoroughly.

11. Assume that the reporter knows as much as you do about any given topic. It is possible he/she left out some fact you believe is critical because further research showed the "fact" to be untrue. Or, information may have been left out because it was not relevant or was too specific for the general audience. You can verify the reporter's knowledge through conversation, but don't assume immediately that it is lacking.

12. If there is a factual error in the article, you should not shy away from requesting a correction. Follow the normal protocol: ask the reporter, then his/her editor, then the publisher (if not yet resolved).

13. If you disagree with the tone or slant of the article, send a letter to the editor or write a column for the op-ed page (the newspaper's page of opinion columns) expressing your own view.

14. Compliment good reporting if the reporter handled parts of the story well. Reporters don't get enough praise for work well done.

The bottom-line is simple. Reporters are only as good as their sources and their ability to understand and communicate information. It is your job to be a good source, which includes having good information and communicating effectively - avoiding jargon and the arcane language of your field.

If you follow these suggestions, you are much more likely to make a positive impression on the reporter. Good luck and never hesitate to call and discuss your view point. Good journalists appreciate feedback.

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