Writing science

Tips for Communicating Your Science with the Press: Approaching Journalists

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Sharing science beyond academia is increasingly on our to-do lists, whether our goal is to get more citations, increase discussion of our work on social media, or reach specific stakeholder groups who could benefit from our work. Press coverage is one common and potentially powerful way of sharing our science.

In this article, we won't delve into the potential pitfalls—suffice to say there are pros and cons to media coverage, as there are for most science communication and engagement efforts. Here, we will focus on what to do once you have decided you want to reach out to a journalist in hopes of them covering your research.

When you approach a journalist, you are pitching them on the idea of doing a story about you. This is not the same thing as proposing that you write a story for them. Consider connecting with your institution's press office. They have experience identifying compelling stories from within science research. They also have contacts with local, regional, and national journalists which they may be able to leverage for you. However, it is also possible to approach journalists on your own.

Where to find journalists

Meet the locals. Even if you have considerable experience being interviewed, your local media outlets may be interested in your research, how you run your laboratory, or who you are as a scientist. However, depending on where you do your research and where your institution is located, local media outlets may not have a dedicated science beat or reporter. They may be looking for human interest stories more than "science says" breaking news. They may have more time to meet with you, flexibility with the deadline for your story, or even an editorial mandate to cover your institution with regularity. All of these factors may work in your favor as you try to gain the journalist's attention.

Look for journalists and outlets that regularly cover your kind of science. Narrow the field by identifying those that cover your discipline in ways that you consider accurate, responsible, and compelling.

Use social media strategically. Increasingly, journalists accept pitches on Twitter. On this platform, journalists are often also active professionals posting about their own work, the beats (subject areas) they cover), and more. Twitter can help you identify journalists you would like to cover your work. Once you do, tap into advice readily available online regarding the etiquette of building relationships with journalists through social media. In particular, share your idea in a private message. If you share it in a public tweet, your idea is no longer exclusive, and the journalist will likely pass. In addition to Twitter, journalists often use LinkedIn to identify possible sources. Thus, having a credible and up-to-date profile on LinkedIn and Twitter is important for validating your identity. It is not necessary to purge your social media of all traces of your own personality, but it is important that journalists looking you up on social media are able to verify that you are credible based on what you present on that platform. Do not pitch via Facebook—that platform is most commonly used personally, and journalists do not tend to appreciate being approached there.

But first, email. Most journalists responding to surveys (Helmuth 2012), panels, and focus groups asking how they prefer to receive pitches confirm: They do not want a phone call, and email is the best way to initiate contact.

Basic pitch structure

Once you have identified the journalist(s) you wish to approach, you will start tailoring your pitch to that exact person and their outlet. A pitch to the *Laramie Boomerang* (a community newspaper in a college town in Wyoming), *High Country News* (a weekly magazine of record in the West), and Radio Lab (a program of National Public Radio) should be unique in terms of story ideas, how you relate your work to the outlet's readership, and more. We will explore these nuances in more detail below. You can use the following outline as a worksheet of sorts.

- **Subject line**
  - "Story idea: Brief phrase about your angle"
  - This should be as close to a compelling and comprehendible headline as you can imagine.
  - Note that headlines are a) usually not complete sentences and b) usually written by editors. The journalist you work with may suggest a headline, but journalists usually do *not* have control over the final headline.

- **Salutation**
  - Target specific individuals as often as possible.
  - Make sure you spell their name correctly.
  - Use the most respectful prefixes and suffixes you can, based on what you know about them. *Of course, if you already know the journalist personally, you can begin accordingly.*

- **Body of pitch**
  - Max two paragraphs. It is critical that you get to the point quickly, because most journalists and their editors are swamped with story ideas at all times.

- Flip the typical academic paper structure. Start with the results and conclusions—leave background details for much later. Flipping this pyramid ensures you don't "bury the lede"—journalist speak for waiting until the end to tell the reader what's important. Most of the time, the reader will not read to the end if they do not already know what is important or interesting enough to *keep* reading.
- **Story vs. topic:** Flipping the pyramid can also help you to pitch not just a topic but an actual story angle. This distinction may determine whether the journalist wants to take on your idea. And, the difference between a topic and a story angle may be what makes your idea viable for the journalist's editor, who almost always has the final say.
- **Keep your pitch as succinct, yet complete, as you can.** This is not to say that you provide enough information the journalist can write the story without interviewing you. Rather, they should be able to understand the story *idea* (including characters, any discovery or conflict, location, scientific significance) from your pitch email, without you having to explain it further.
- **Keep your pitch as jargon-free as possible,** and explain any essential jargon you use. Not sure how to decide? If you have defined/explained more than three terms, you probably need to work further on reducing the jargon. Try asking someone you work with, who has experience with communication and engagement efforts, to look over your draft. You could also use a free, online, readability app. These apps will evaluate text you copy and paste into them. Readability apps can tell you the reading level of the text (e.g., sixth grade, eleventh grade), the overall structure of your text (e.g., overly long sentences, complex vocabulary that could be simplified), etc. And, your institutional press office or professional society may have suggestions, such as those on the American Geophysical Union's Sharing Science website (AGU 2018*b*).
- **The timeliness and rarity of the idea**—News, by definition, is about telling a story or sharing information first, or in a novel way. This is a fundamental currency of journalism. Is your story idea sensitive? Have you told other journalists about it? Is it under embargo? Is this "brand new" news? Is this an "ever-green" idea? Are you proposing a new/unique twist on what folks might otherwise think is "old" news? Is there a particular season of the year when this story would be most appropriate? Likewise, is there a way to tie your research into something that is currently trending? This last one can be great, but don't stretch too far or you might lose credibility.
- **You**—Unless you are pitching yourself as the story (e.g., a scientist profile), you will need to provide some information about why you are qualified to be a source. You should also make clear what your availability is. The more responsive and available you can be, particularly if the story idea is time-sensitive, the more likely you'll receive a positive response from journalists.

- **Images**
  - Be sure to provide one to three high-resolution photographs. There is evidence that images are more compelling than words. You can take advantage of that in your pitch to catch the journalist's attention.
  - Look at the guidelines on the media outlet's website, to see whether they have a preference for how you provide images (e.g., links versus attachments).
  - Depending on the story angle, your pictures may be of you doing research, your study species, your study site, etc.
  - Images should be compelling, clear, and reproduce well in black and white and color.
  - Use only photographs you know you have permission to distribute and to license for reproduction. Be sure you have documentation of your right to reproduce and distribute the photographs, if someone else took them.

- Provide detailed photograph credits and captions.
- Some media outlets require model releases. If there are people in your photographs (particularly minors under the age of 18), it is a good idea to have those model releases signed and in your files before you even send anyone the photographs. Your institution's press office or institutional marketing should be able to provide you with their standard, legal model release.

- **Closing**
  - Keep this brief. Wrap up, and/or look forward.
  - You could mention your availability here.
  - You could specify that you are willing to provide background information, if they need it but decide not to write the article about you directly.
  - You could specify that you are only willing to be a source if they allow you to a) review quotes, b) review article for factual information, etc. Note that the more such constraints you impose, the less likely journalists are to engage with you.

- **Signature**
  - Include your full name, any titles or pronouns they should know about, etc.
  - Make sure all your contact information is provided in this first email.
  - If you don't want someone texting you, but you're okay with them calling your personal phone number, you can specify that sort of detail.

For advice on what to do when your pitch succeeds and the journalist wants to interview you, see the excellent resources from the American Geophysical Union (AGU 2018*a*, *c*), contact your institutional press officers, and reach out to colleagues who have experience being interviewed. Practice interviews, with colleagues or someone from your press office, are a good idea—they can help you incorporate the advice you receive into an actual interview.

Editor's note: "Writing Science" is a new column focused on actionable advice for enhancing science writing skills. Topics will range from public engagement and communicating with journalists to grant writing and accessible, academic science writing. If you have suggestions for topics or would like to respond to the column, please write us at bulletin@esa.org*. Letters to the editor may be reprinted and edited for length and clarity.*

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