

Interview guide for people preparing to speak to the media

This guide is for people who are thinking about doing a media interview.

It provides basic information about what journalists are looking for, and why, how to contact journalists, and steps to control an interview and the story *you* want told.

This guide also provides information about how to protect yourself, your family, your friends and colleagues when dealing with the media.

Your story is the most important story of all. Your voice can change the future. But your story is yours – and you can choose which bits of your story you want to talk about.

Background

What kind of ‘stories’ is the media looking for?

Journalists and people involved in the media produce ‘stories’ as part of their job. This can include producing radio or television interviews and writing news or commentary. Some radio journalists contribute 6-8 stories a day to their media organisation, while print journalists may do 1-3.

Generally speaking journalists and media outlets are looking for:

- A breaking news story, meaning it is the first time the ‘story’ is being told
- A fresh angle to an existing story or issue
- Reaction to something that’s happened
- Real life stories that bring attention to an issue or policy/program success or failure

Story example:

Government announces a new policy.

The journalist’s story will include:

- Interview with the government about the policy
- Comment sought from the Opposition and other political players
- ‘Reaction’ from stakeholder groups
- Interviews with people – to illustrate the impact of the announcement on those affected.

What will I gain from doing an interview?

- It is an opportunity to raise awareness of an issue that people might not know about
- It can showcase your work in this space – the good work that you’re doing in your local community, or around a particular issue
- It is an opportunity to show the problem lies with government policy, not individual effort – so changing hearts and minds
- You can assist in highlighting problem areas and inadequacy needing attention that normal or usual spokespeople don’t talk about
- You can raise public awareness of an issue, assist in changing perception, and use the interview to mobilise action.

Setting up the interview

How do I get the media interested in my story?

Reasons for seeking to contact a journalist or a media outlet:

- Generating media interest about an issue affecting you and others;
- Increasing community and government awareness and understanding of how services or programs are impacting you;
- Promoting awareness of a particular problem affecting you and others so action can be taken to fix it.

How to make contact:

- Phoning a local or known journalist
- Putting out a media release
- Organising a media conference
- Organising an event or public meeting which the media is invited to attend
- Posting content on social media
- Doing a community service radio announcement and radio advertisement
- Writing an opinion piece or story for a publication online or offline
- Writing letters to the editor
- Providing background information to journalists (‘off-the-record’, meaning that you won’t be identified if the information is used).

Think about what you can offer the journalist:

- You can offer them a story that has not already been told.

- You have a point of view that has not been covered in any other media stories. (eg. you think a particular program/service or agency provides really poor service, whereas everybody else the journalist has spoken to thinks it's great).
- You have a personal story that will provide insight into an issue (eg. you are a recipient of Newstart and are describing what you need to buy on a daily basis, versus how much money you actually have).

What do I do if a journalist calls me for an interview?

1. Always be courteous and polite
2. Ask them who they are and which media outlet they represent
3. They may start asking you questions. Do not answer their questions straight away
4. Ask the journalist:
 - What is the story about, and what angle are they doing
 - Are they wanting an interview, or just background information
 - What questions will they ask
 - Who else will they be interviewing
 - When are they hoping to publish the story? That night? In tomorrow's papers?
5. Tell them:
 - I can't talk right now. I can call you back. This will give you time to think about whether you really want to do the interview, and what you would say in the interview.
6. Have a think. Get some advice from a trusted friend or organisation.
7. Call the journalist back and tell them your answer. Make sure any background information you provide is off-the-record.
8. Organise a time and place to do the interview. Or if it's over the phone, organise a time to do the interview. Make sure you give yourself enough time for preparation – at least one hour. Make sure you agree to do the interview in a location that you are comfortable in. You do not have to agree to the journalist's choice of location.

Dealing with a 'difficult' journalist

Some journalists can come across as pushy and demanding, especially given the tight deadlines and demands placed on them. They can be very good at phoning people or coming up to people in the street and asking questions that make people feel that they must answer the questions straight away.

What to do:

- It is best not to answer a journalist's questions straight away. Always give yourself time to think and prepare. Just remember that they need you more than you need them.

- Treat journalists courteously and diplomatically at all times, even if it is to tell them you cannot assist them with their inquiry. Their impression of you becomes their impression of the issue and that is reflected in their stories.
- If a journalist is outright rude or hostile, you can make an official complaint – refer to ‘How to make a complaint’ section below.

Should I do an interview? What to consider

Yes. If:

- You have talked a lot with the journalist prior to doing the interview, so that they fully understand what your position is, and you fully understand what the story is they are wanting to tell. This ensures you are making an informed decision about whether to do the interview.
- You have done research about what the issues are the journalist is doing their story on.
- You feel like you are in control and that you have ownership of your own story.
- You are assured that the journalist is not going to misrepresent you, or your story.
- You have confirmed with the journalist that you will be assured anonymity (if that’s what you want)
- You have confirmed with the journalist they will provide a copy of the interview to you so that you can review it prior to publication (only some journalists will agree to this)
- You are convinced that telling your story will bring attention to an important issue that needs to be known or addressed by authorities.

No. If:

- You are really concerned or feeling vulnerable about areas of your life
- You are not sure what the journalist wants – you are finding it difficult to get clarity from the journalist about what they’re after
- You do not feel like you are in control. You feel like you are being ‘steam-rolled’ into an interview by the journalist or some other person
- You do not want to be a spokesperson for a particular issue
- You feel that telling your story could actually hinder not assist the issue you want to highlight or progress.

Can I do an interview anonymously?

- Think about your work, your home, your life and your relationships. If you have the slightest concern that going public could expose you, damage your employment, or hurt you or your family, then you can choose to do an interview anonymously.

- You will need to make an arrangement for anonymity with the journalist, before doing the interview. You will need to feel confident the journalist will do as you have asked. If you don't, you don't have to do the interview.
- Journalists can de-identify you if you agree you want to be anonymous. That means, they can (camera) shoot you from behind, or in a shadow, they can pixelate you, and change your voice.
- Make sure you specify the degree of anonymity you desire.

Preparing for the interview

- What you are doing is really important. Your story, and the stories of so many people, can change the course of history. The stories of people with lived experience can have a bigger impact on policies and programs than mountains of research and data.
- Media interviews are always unpredictable, so it is important to be as prepared as possible. Think about the questions that you might be asked and the answers you are willing to give.
- You will feel more relaxed, and more in control of the interview – and your story - if you have prepared.

Steps to take:

- Work out what you want to say, and what you don't want to say.
- Aim for between 1 and 3 main points. Eg. I have been on Newstart for two years and I am facing homelessness. There are no jobs where I live. The government needs to increase Newstart and reduce homelessness.
- Think about how you want to make your points. Think about how it will come across to someone listening. Think about what you want to achieve with this interview and whether your points do that.
- Write down what you want to say. You can do this in dot points, or in a list. Once you're in the interview, remember your three points, and stick to them.
- The journalist will ask you questions, including: What, How, Who, Why and When. Practice answering each question. Eg. What happened? How did it make you feel? Who was affected? Etc.
- Practice telling your story front of a mirror. Ask you friend to pretend to be a journalist and answer their What, Who, Why etc. questions.
- Think about what you will do if the journalist asks you a personal or intrusive question. Practice saying an answer that you have already prepared, even if it doesn't answer the question the journalist has asked you.
- Anticipate difficult or unexpected questions. Eg. Why haven't you moved towns if there are no jobs here? Be prepared to answer them.

- Do your research. Know what other stakeholders in the space are saying.

Should I talk to someone before the interview? Can I have a support person with me?

- It's always good to talk to someone before you do an interview.
- A support person could be a media or communications person from a relevant organisation, a colleague, someone trusted, or a family member or friend.
- Talk through any concerns you have, and also any potential ramifications of doing media.
- Practice questions and answers beforehand with your support person.
- Ask your support person if they can be at the interview with you.
- Ask your support person to stop the interview (off camera) if they can see it is getting out of hand, and is hurting or distressing the person being interviewed.
- Debrief with your support person after the interview.

At the interview

Be on time

- If a media interview time has been established, make sure you are available do the interview at that time.
- If something comes up and you can't do the interview, let the journalist know as soon as possible and arrange to do it at another time. This is particularly important for live to air radio or television interviews.

General approach

- Be warm, friendly, courteous, and respectful to the journalist.
- Always tell the truth. Never lie or mislead. Never make things up. This will hurt you, or the cause you are advocating on behalf of.
- Be authoritative – know your stuff and be an expert in what you are talking about. Stick to the facts you know.
- Don't use technical jargon
- Take your time. Think about how you want to answer a question. The journalist may might want to go fast, but you can go as slow as you want. It's ok if there is silence in an interview. They will edit the silence out.
- Don't volunteer information which might harm you or respond to irrelevant questions which might incriminate or hurt you.

- Stay calm - never get angry or lose your cool, particularly on TV or radio. When you get angry on television it looks like you are angry at the audience. Some unscrupulous journalist might cut the footage and only use those bits. It's hard for a journalist to attack a person who remains calm and reasonable.

How do I stay in control of the interview questions?

- You don't have to answer every question just because a journalist asks them. They're not police or people with special powers. They're just people in a job.
- Answer the questions that you think you can answer.
- If the journalist is asking questions that don't have relevance to the story YOU want to share, have some prepared things to say to turn the interview around. Eg. "Let's put your question into perspective ...", or "that's not the issue, the issue is the fact that Centrelink are automatically targeting people who have no debts at all." Alternatively, share some facts and figures.
- Bridging creates a transition so that you can move from one subject to the message you want to communicate. Some ways to bridges:
 - "The real issue here is...."
 - "It's important to remember that..."
 - "What I can tell you is ..."
- If you are asked a question that seems off topic, if need be, you can answer the question by giving an answer to a question you think they should have asked. For example: Do you think the PM should be sacked? Answer: The issue I am talking about is the fact that job agencies can only do so much when there are literally no jobs available for people in our town.
- It's OK to say "I don't know", but tell the journalist you will find out and get back to them later.

Watch out for defamation

- When telling your story or reacting to a story in a media interview, be mindful not to defame anyone. Across Australia each state and territory has a set of defamation laws which are in place to protect people's reputation. This occurs where someone hurts the reputation of another by spreading false information about them.
- For more information, you can check-out this website: [Lawstuff – Know your rights](#). Simply click on your state or territory and scroll down to 'defamation' under The Law section.

After the interview

- Thank the journalist for being interested in the issue, and in your story.
- Ask for a copy of the interview.

- Always listen to, watch or read the interview. This will help you improve in your own technique, but will also inform you further about the journalist and whether you should go to them into the future.

How to make a complaint

- If a journalist is overly demanding or puts a foot in the door without your permission or is verbally aggressive or abusive in any way, tell them you know there is a media code of ethics and a media complaints body and that there are ways to raise poor media behaviour through Media Watch, as well as privacy laws. Say, I don't think this is ethical journalism and I'm going to make a complaint.
- If it's clear that a person is aware of their rights and some of the bodies that protect them that's sometimes enough to end a hostile media process before it begins.
- Remember, it's illegal to record/interview people without their consent, or for a person to enter your home without your consent.

Complain to who?

The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) has developed a [Journalist Code of Ethics](https://www.meaa.org/meaa-media/code-of-ethics/). If you believe a journalist has breached this code you can lodge an official complaint – follow these steps: <https://www.meaa.org/meaa-media/code-of-ethics/>

Please note that MEAA can undertake no action or investigation that involves individuals who are not MEAA members.

Complaints about non-MEAA members should be taken up with the appropriate media employer and/or media industry groups:

- The [Australian Press Council](#) has guidelines and standards for print and digital media outlets.
- Several broadcasting industry groups operate a complaints process: [Free TV Australia](#); [Commercial Radio Australia](#); the [ABC](#) and [SBS](#); the [Community Broadcasting Association of Australia](#) and [Australian Community Television Alliance](#).
- The government regulator, the [Australian Communications and Media Authority](#), offers a mechanism for complaints about broadcasting.
- You should consider making a complaint to the relevant media outlet. Several media employers operate in-house codes of practice / conduct for employees.

If your complaint is about the ABC or SBS, see:
Complaints about the [ABC](#) or [SBS](#).