

General interview techniques

First and foremost, identifying a good spokesperson is fundamental for any media interview.

The actual profession/job title of the selected individual will depend on your organisation and the subject of the interview. Regardless of who your spokesperson is, here is some general guidance.

No matter what type the interview is (TV, radio, newspaper etc), try and establish what the interview is going to be about and what questions you are going to be asked. Always remember that, even if questions are provided ahead of the interview, a journalist may still ask questions you have not been given.

Therefore, make sure you have the key messages you want to say in the interview rehearsed. Try to have three key messages. You do not have to know them word for word, but have in your mind, or on paper, the main facts and/or figures you want to state during the interview. So, know your messages and get your three key messages across.

Interviewer personalities will vary widely, but it is important for the interviewee to remain focussed on the key messages. By keeping focus, it will help you to control the interview without being intimidated when you are asked questions.

One method of doing this to remember, **A-B-C: Acknowledge – Bridge – Contribute**

When asked a question, you respond and **Acknowledge** the question, then

Bridge to one of your key messages and **Contribute** one of your key messages:

‘Bridging’ is the most important part of this technique. This is because you are about to be subtle and discreet in how you shift the question and turn it around so that it shifts the focus on to one of the key messages that you want to talk about and, at the same time, away from what the reporter wants to talk about.

For example:

Acknowledge	Bridge	Contribute
That might well be the case in that situation, but...	that situation is very different from the one here today which is...	...Key Message
I cannot comment on that specifically, but...	let us not forget that...	...Key Message
That may be the case in another event,	however I should say that...	...Key Message



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With A-B-C in mind, here are some Do's and Don'ts when being interviewed.

Do answer the question. It is best to answer even tough questions, or your credibility with the audience may be damaged. Remember, you're not obligated to agree to the interviewer's statements, and your mission is to deliver your key messages.

Do try and keep answers short. You may do a television interview for 30 minutes, but the average 'sound-bite' is only 10 to 20 seconds long, so be clear and concise.

Do make sure you get your messages across. Answer questions, but try not to be distracted from communicating your messages.

Do use firsthand examples and descriptive language. Communicating personal experiences can be dramatic and powerful, so use them if you can.

Do make science simple. When using statistics or numbers, put these numbers into meaningful terms. Is "two thirds" more appropriate for the audience than "more than 60 percent".

Do use simple language. Always have your audience in mind and speak in terms that will be familiar to them. Avoid scientific jargon, such as "geostrophic winds," and "Milanovitch-Kroll cycle".

Do pause before answering. Take a brief moment to consider your response. Even for radio and television, this pause will seem thoughtful and natural and can add authority to your response.

Do take the high ground. Always respond in a positive way, and turn negative questions or comments into positive statements. Reporters will often ask a negative question or plant a 'buzzword' in a question to get you to repeat it, if only in denial. This will make for colourful and probably inappropriate quotes. Always respond by answering with positive statements and replacing objectionable words with more acceptable terms.

Do question facts, if necessary. If confronted with findings or statistics you are not familiar with or you believe may be incorrect, use A-B-C. Say, "I'm not familiar with those statistics so I really can't comment on that matter" or "based on [cite other statistics], the most important thing to remember is [statement that communicates your message]". If asked, for example, about a report you haven't read, be sure and say so, but use the question as an opportunity to communicate your messages.

Don't ramble. Reporters often wait before asking their next question to encourage you to keep talking. Therefore, deliver your message concisely then stop talking and wait for the next question – and become comfortable with silence.

Don't use inappropriate humour, profanity, or any kind of derogatory language.

Don't discuss hypothetical situations or unfamiliar matters. If asked about a situation or case of which you have incomplete information, or about a hypothetical situation, respond by discussing the issue instead. Say, "I can't respond to hypothetical situations, but if you're asking about the issue of [state the issue], it's clear that [state your message]".

Don't argue or interrupt. You don't have to agree, but don't argue either. And don't interrupt. Other guests are another matter. You may need to jump in when another guest is talking to correct misinformation or to comment.

Don't lose your temper. You can tell a reporter you cannot comment – and explain why – but never get angry.

Don't lie or bluff. If you don't know an answer, say so. You can damage your credibility by speculating incorrectly.

Don't use a script when answering questions. It will probably sound like you are reading and this will make your response sound impersonal and make you sound like you are not confident in what you are talking about. Making sure that you have your key messages firmly in mind will help your overall confidence during an interview. This confidence will help you to speak with a greater degree of authority and to convey gravitas.

At the same time, confidence in your key messages can help you control any nerves and breathing.

Communicating a consistent message is the best way to make sure your message is heard..

Don't be afraid to rephrase your response to any question. It may sound like you are repeating oneself, but a reporter is often looking for a 'sound-bite', so may well ask very similar questions.

Remember: try to keep language as simple as possible. Never use a long word where a short one will do.