

Section 1: Preparing for the Interview

Before You Start

Media interviews can be nerve-racking experiences, especially if you are not used to speaking in front of cameras or in public. Before you begin answering questions, it is helpful to remember the following:

- **Just breathe.** Taking a few deep breaths before starting will help calm you down, think clearly, and remember what you want to say.
- **You are not “live.”** Most interviews are recorded and aired later; therefore, it is okay to make mistakes and answer questions over again if you don't like how something came out or what you said. You can also ask the journalist to re-ask a question if you want to hear it again.
- **Think about your surroundings.** You may want to consider moving some of the papers on your desk and closing sensitive webpages on your computer.
 - Let other people in your office know that a journalist will be coming to do an interview.
- **Look professional (when possible).** Keep a dress shirt in the office for unexpected interviews. Avoid wearing bright, bold colours or ornate designs on camera.
- **Always ensure you are authorized to speak to the media.** Get approval from your manager, executive director, the board of directors, or chair of the board if you need it.
- At the beginning or end of the interview, it is normal for the journalist to ask you to say and spell your name and title.

Research & Practice

- **Know your material.** This includes key facts, dates, events, and chronologies. If you don't know the answer to a question or a fact, let the journalist know and tell them you will get back to them.
- **Practice general overview (open-ended) questions.** “What is *Getting to Tomorrow* all about? What is the goal of this project? Why is this important?” These questions will help you focus your thoughts and give you ideas and material to help you answer more specific questions.
 - Open-ended questions are ones that can't be answered with a single word, e.g., “yes” or “no.” “Why is harm reduction so important?” is an open-ended question; it invites a longer answer.
- **Always prepare for the “How does it make you feel? / What is your reaction?” question.** For example, “The Province of Manitoba just released their fatal overdose statistics, and we have hit another record. What is your reaction to this?”
 - Since these questions are so open-ended, they are often good opportunities to pivot to your key messages: “I am horrified at the latest overdose numbers. If we had pharmacists distributing drugs in the province instead of the illegal market, many of these people would still be with us today because they would have had access to a safe, regulated supply of substances.”

- **Practice challenging questions.** Look online for what people who hold different or opposing views from you on an issue have said. This will give you an idea of what the hard questions may be.
 - Journalists will often ask you to comment on an issue that has already been reported in the news or an event that has just happened. This means there will be a public record online of commentary on the subject that can help you prepare for difficult questions.
 - Journalist will also often approach you for an interview by email. When this is the case, ask them what the focus of the interview will be if they have not clearly indicated this. Knowing the focus will help you think of questions that you may get asked. It is improper for journalists to tell you what the exact questions will be, but common for them to tell you the focus of their interview.
- **Have an answer to, “Is there anything else you would like to add?”** Journalists will often ask this at the end of the interview. This is a great opportunity to present your key messages if you didn't get a chance to state them during the interview.
- **Always do a pre-interview if the journalist asks for one.** These are considered “on background” (see “Interacting with Journalists”) and will help you get a sense of the questions they may ask. A pre-interview usually happens one or two days before the actual interview.

Key Messages

- **Practice.** Spend at least 15 minutes before each interview going over key messages you would like to get across during the interview. These are the most important points you want people to hear.
- **Don't have too many key messages.** Three to five is the maximum.
- **Keep key messages short and simple.** If messages are too long or complicated they are harder to remember.
 - “Canadian drug policy is a failure because...”
 - “Decriminalizing drugs will save lives because...”
- **Tailor your key messages.** They should relate to the news or the issue that prompts the call from the journalist. For example, a journalist may be investigating an increase in property crime around a recently opened supervised consumption site. Key messages should address the main concerns expressed by opponents and counteract the fear and stigma being spread by them. In this case, a sample response could be that, “multiple rigorous studies have shown that crime goes down around supervised consumption sites. Recent media attention around the site has merely resulted in more people reporting suspicious behaviour because they are now more aware of it. This will naturally result in more reports, but this does not mean an actual increase in crime.”

Answering Questions

- **Be conversational.** Answer questions like you would if you were speaking to a friend rather than if you were in a job interview or an academic setting. Avoid jargon or over-technical, complicated explanations.
- **Try to repeat the question in your answer.**
 - Q: “What is the one thing you would like the public to understand?”
 - A: “The one thing I would like the public to understand is...”

- **Be clear.** Answer the question in the most straightforward way possible. Know the DNA of your answer (What are you trying to say?) and take the shortest, straight-line path to that answer.
- **Be specific.** Provide examples when possible.
 - Q: “How does drug policy in Canada need to change?”
 - A: “Drug policy in Canada needs to change by going from a criminal justice model to a public health/human rights model. *What that means is not arresting people who are carrying and using small amounts of drugs, opening more supervised consumption sites, and providing more housing.*”
- **Correct yourself.** If you make a mistake or say something inaccurate, correct yourself as soon as possible. Journalists will not include information they know is wrong.
- **Be ready for non-question questions.** These are asked as statements followed by a pause that invites you to respond; e.g., “The coroner’s report has just been released and it is showing 4,000 more overdose deaths. It is unbelievable how many people are dying from toxic drugs.”
 - Because they are so open-ended, these are often good opportunities to introduce key messages.
- **Watch what you say.** Always consider the microphone *on*, even when the interview is over.
- **Take your time.** After you have been asked a question, it is okay to think about what you are going to say and how you are going to respond. This only applies to interviews that are not live.
- **Less is more.** In general, it is better to keep your answers short (45-90 seconds). Don’t feel like you have to keep going when there is nothing left to say. When you start to stretch your answers, you may end up saying something you didn’t mean.

Answering Challenging (Loaded) Questions

- **Answer the question; don’t avoid it.** You can reframe the issue more positively.
 - Q: “Your organization wants to defund the police. So, what happens when you have an active shooter situation? Are you okay with the potential for people to die?” (Loaded question)
 - A: “Actually, public safety is our main concern, and that is why we think some of the funding going to police should go to other agencies that are better able to handle the type of calls that police are regularly responding to—like mental health calls—that often result in someone being injured. This would result in more public safety, not less. Police themselves have said they are not equipped to handle these sorts of complex interactions with the public. So why are we paying them to do this?”
 - Replying with an evasive response or non-answer will erode audience trust (they can tell when you are avoiding a question) and draw the reporter’s attention to your reluctance to directly address the issue, which can prompt them to keep asking.
- **Make the answer short and then pivot to a key message.** There are transition phrases that can help:
 - “What is really important, though...”
 - “But the real issue here is...”

- “But what we actually need to be thinking about is...”
- Two good examples of pivoting to key messages are at [19:42](#) (“but there is a bigger issue here...”) and [20:58](#) (“our immediate focus here...”) of this interview with NBC’s Chuck Todd.
- **If you don’t have the answer, it is okay to state that.** Let the journalist know you will get back to them with the information they are looking for.
- **Keep a calm, rational tone.** For broadcast (TV, radio, video), do not get worked up or overly defensive and angry when answering a challenging/oppositional question. A calm tone will impart more credibility to your answer and make you more believable.
 - Subconsciously, people realize that if an answer is strong on its own merits, it does not have to be yelled or punctuated with emotion.
 - However, for certain questions—such as reaction questions to a tragedy or injustice—it will be appropriate to show emotion. In these instances, an emotional response will make your answer stronger by humanizing you as the speaker.
- **Stay focused until the end of the interview.** For some interviews, the most challenging questions will come at the end.

Interacting with Journalists

There are various levels of engagement between journalists and the public. A journalist will almost always contact you beforehand by email or phone to set up an interview. When they reach out to you by email, respond to them right away—even if you don’t know whether you are able to be interviewed—and let them know you are looking into their request. Don’t wait until you have an answer to their interview request to respond. Journalists are on extremely tight deadlines and need to have an answer quickly. If you or someone at your organization is unavailable for comment, the journalist needs to look for someone else for their story. It helps to ask what their deadline (to have a response) is, but always assume that it is two to three hours after they send you the initial email request.

In situations where there is breaking news or if you are at a public event, such as a rally or demonstration, journalists may come up to you directly for an interview. In these situations, you can politely decline to comment if you are not comfortable. The only time a journalist will begin an interview without consent is in cases of breaking news where the individual being interviewed is accused of serious wrongdoing, or there is an overriding public interest in getting a comment from an individual. This is usually the case for politicians or those at the centre of contentious court proceedings or events.

There are various levels of engagement when interacting with a journalist:

- **“Off the record”** means the information you are sharing with the journalist is shared in confidence (privately), and the reporter will only use it for research.
- **“On background”** means the reporter may use the information you provide in a story but will not attribute it to you. Be careful not to share information that only you, or a small group of individuals, know because the source can then be determined.



- **“On record”** means you are being directly quoted. Always assume you are “on record” unless otherwise stated.

The role and purpose of media: The media play a vital role in civil society. Journalism is essential for the functioning of a strong democracy and for holding institutions and governments accountable for their actions, including the implementation of (drug) policies that can both help and harm people who use drugs. Attacking the media is not helpful and can hurt efforts at creating systemic change and reform. Though individual journalists can write problematic stories on occasion, this should not reflect on the entire craft and its practitioners. Journalists work under extremely challenging circumstances (constrained budgets, increased workload and expectations, public hostility). Often, an omission or framing/language issue is due to a lack of time, support, and resources. Organizations best serve their own interests when they can help journalists do their jobs and offer guidance and support.