Preparing for a media interview

Before the interview

Know your audience
What is the news outlet or TV show?
What kind of interviews/content do they usually feature?

Know your journalist
You can even ask them what they’re interested to know. What will the interview focus on?

Distill your message
Decide on 1-3 main points you want to get across, and think about how you will present them. Know clearly what those are before you start the interview.

Identify your story
What’s surprising, exciting, difficult, or upsetting about your subject?

Prepare vivid examples
Back up each of your main ideas with examples, facts, figures, metaphors, and quotes.

Why is this important?
Answer the “so what?” question. Why should the listener care about it? Why do you care about it?

Anticipate tough questions
Every field has parts that make some people uncomfortable, and you are likely to be asked about them at some point. Are you doing research on animals? What are you doing with my personal information? Are you going to create a black hole? Prepare a good answer. They are all asking the same thing: can I trust science? Tough questions are an opportunity to respond.

During the interview

Be conversational
Treat the interview as an interesting conversation with a friend. Connect with the interviewer. Don’t be afraid to show energy, enthusiasm and emotional involvement. Avoid acronyms.

Slow down for important ideas
Don’t rush, and don’t be afraid to repeat yourself.

Make sure to hit your main points
If you need to, bring the conversation back to your message: “Yes that’s true, but what I really think is important is…”

Flag your main points
“The important thing is…” “The thing to remember is…”
Don’t guess
Always tell the truth. If you don’t know an answer, don’t guess. Say that you’ll check and get back to the reporter, and do that. Stick to facts, otherwise you will tarnish your credibility, and the credibility of the science community at large.

Answer in complete sentences that repeat the question
This allows your quotes to stand alone. Q: Why is this research important?
A: This research is important because it will prevent blindness in developing countries.

Use a downward inflection
You must erase the uptone from your speech. Ending sentences with an up-inflection is common in conversation, but in interviews it appears questioning, unsure, and needy for reassurance, even if you are none of these things. Listen to a recording of yourself to be sure and make this a new habit.

You are always on camera
When the interviewer is asking a question, listen and nod. Keep your eyes on the interviewer. Don’t rock, sigh, or fidget.

After the interview

Help the reporter
Offer to follow up with any resources that were mentioned, or answer any other questions he/she might have.

Pitch your story with newsworthy features

Proximity
Is it local? Television needs sound and pictures. If the story is outside the station’s viewing area, it better be good. Travel time is a big consideration.

Prominence
Does the story involve a well-known person, place, or organization?

Impact
How does the story affect the local community?

Timeliness
Is it happening now? Is it new? Yesterday’s news isn’t worth repeating unless there’s a way to advance the story.

Conflict and controversy
Are there at least two opposing sides? An element of surprise?

Human interest
It may not be the most important story, but perhaps it’s the most interesting or unusual.