

A guide to television and radio interviews - do's and don'ts

Before the interview

Translate into everyday English

Think of the words that you use with your academic colleagues and the words you will need to replace them with for a general audience to understand what you are talking about.

Research your audience

Each program on each station has a slightly different audience and style. Here in Adelaide you might be interviewed by the ABC, a Community station or a Commercial station. Who are the listeners/viewers, what is their average age and gender, what is their likely education level, what are their specific interests? If you can match your interview to the audience it will be received much better. For example if you are talking about health research on a station with a sporting focus, you might talk about odds rather than risks. You might also emphasise the more physical, perhaps competitive aspects of your research. Audiences of gardening programs are quite likely to be interested in nutrition and hydration - but try to think about the similarities of your research to gardening. A morning women's program might be interested in weight loss and appearance but they love to hear about the practicalities of how to do things.

Find your stories

Do not prepare exact answers but do take time to think about the different stories in your research. This takes a little practice because you are likely to be thinking of a research in the context of your academic discipline. Try to stand outside it and look in at it as if you have never heard anything about the subject before. Remember that your audience expects to be entertained. What new experiences can you offer them?

During the interview

Don't assume your interviewer is knowledgeable about you or your subject

Interviewers vary – some are excellent, some are dreadful, and many are mediocre. Just because you have spoken at length to a Producer and they seemed to understand who you are, where you work and quite a bit about your work, they will not necessarily have been able to communicate this to your interviewer. Don't be surprised if your interviewer doesn't even get your name right much less the name of your institution. They might not even know your topic or worse still be expecting something quite different. Be prepared to (gently) correct any errors without directly correcting the interviewer. Ideally include the correct information into your reply to the next question.

It is OK if your interviewer knows nothing about your work provided they will give you time to explain it. Unfortunately, many interviewers have their own agenda and will want to talk to you about a view they hold rather than your topic. You need to take charge and politely, but doggedly return the interview to your topic.

Don't ever compromise yourself on air

If there is something you don't wish to discuss on air or in front of camera, just say this. If you are being filmed and make a mistake, put your hand in front of your face and gabble to try to ensure that the piece cannot be edited but remember that in a live interview you can't do this; you have to keep talking!

Studio vs Phone interviews

If you have the time to spare and can access the studio, DO go into the studio and DO arrive at least 15, preferably 30 minutes early. There are many reasons for doing this: It is possible that they might have difficulty with a pre-organised phone interview and want to do your interview a little earlier. You get to see how the studio works. You meet the interviewer in person and gauge their body language. You can see everything that is happening so you know when there is going to be an ad break or that the interviewer is being given a time 'count-down'. The sound is generally very much better. There is a much greater chance of your getting some extra time or being invited back. You might be given the opportunity to answer the listeners' questions 'on air' - this is not always easy though and perhaps not a good idea until you have some studio experience.

If you are going to do a telephone interview, try to avoid using a mobile phone and try to use a phone that is located in a quiet environment. Try to remember that you are on air and not just having a usual phone conversation!

Speak to the individual listener

The real trick to being effective 'on air' is to speak as if you are having a conversation with an individual person in their lounge room or car (if it is 'drive time'). This is quite different to giving a lecture where you will try to engage the whole audience simultaneously. The main reason that people listen to radio is to feel personally and individually connected to the presenters. Remember that you are simultaneously having a conversation with the interviewer and the individual listener and in general, don't give short answers to questions.

Advertising yourself, your research group or Institution

There is often an opportunity to promote yourself as a resource for information. You may be able to promote a Website, a book or some-such so be ready to briefly plug your site at the end of the interview.