Media Training Notes
from Anthony Collings

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Summary
Maximize control.
Anticipate questions.
Prepare short, clear answers.
Repeat your main point.

Details

Importance of Control
It's normal for anyone facing an interview with a journalist to feel nervous. And it's normal to experience concern about "saying the wrong thing." Often people worry that the journalist will use the wrong quote, take it out of context, or misrepresent an interviewee's position.

One way of dealing with those concerns is to gain as much control over the interview process as possible. The suggestions in these media training notes are designed to help achieve that greater degree of control, so that you can communicate more effectively and increase the chances that you are quoted the way you would like to be quoted.

Before the Interview
Gain as much information about the interview as you can. Ask the journalist what is the main focus of the story, when will it run, who else is the journalist interviewing, what is the deadline, and what specifically would the journalist like to ask you about. If you have time, do some research on the journalist's news organization: what types of stories do they run, and what types of quotes do they use?

Put yourself in the journalist's shoes. He or she wants a good story, and is looking for a quote from you that will work well with the other elements in the story. The reporter wants something short and easy to understand that best summarizes your main point. If you were the journalist, what would you want to hear from this interviewee? Also, understand that the journalist is usually just trying to do a good job informing the public about something interesting or important. Journalists ask questions to get
information; it doesn't mean they are "out to get you" or "trying to make you look bad." Understanding journalists' intentions will help you not be defensive and vague in your answers.

_Imagine the likeliest questions, and prepare answers ahead of time._ Ask yourself what the journalist is most likely to ask you. For example, if there is a controversy in your field, the journalist might well ask you for your side and why you take that position. Of course, you can't anticipate every question, but you can probably anticipate the most likely ones and be prepared for them.

_Decide what your main talking point is._ Think of the interview as an excellent opportunity to reach an audience and educate them about what you think is important. Decide what is the single most important thing you would like them to remember. Then focus on ways to communicate it effectively.

_Keep it short._ Avoid long, involved, complex sentences that are hard for the journalist and reader/viewer to follow. They are especially bad for broadcast interviews, for three reasons: 1) long-winded sentences cause viewers to lose the thread, 2) they are difficult for a video editor to deal with, because they can't be broken up into bite-sized short quotes that can be inserted into the story, and 3) they are difficult for you to say smoothly, and the easier you make it for yourself, the more relaxed and confident you'll be. Think modular. Each sentence should be short and self-contained, so that it can be lifted straight out of the interview and inserted into the story, without needing a lot of explanation by the journalist that wastes valuable time and words. One way to keep sentences short is to avoid connective words like "because" in the middle of a sentence. Instead, break up the sentence into mini-sentences. Wrong version: "It won't work because there are too many competitors...." etc. Correct version: "It won't work. Why not? There are too many competitors"...etc

_Keep it simple._ Avoid jargon. You're the expert but the journalist and the audience are not. Use easy, friendly words that ordinary people can understand.

_Structure your answer in three parts._ As you prepare answers for likely questions, try to structure each answer with these three parts:

1) **Very short summary of your main point at beginning.** (This helps the journalist -- and audience, if it is a live shot -- get a framework and reference point for understanding everything you are about to say. To make sure they don't get lost later, you explain to them up front what the main focus is going to be.)

2) **Elaboration in the middle.** (This gives you a chance to add
all the qualifiers that you feel are needed, to avoid oversimplifying. It also
gives you a chance to educate the journalist, so that he or she understands
the context for your position, and chooses the correct angle for the story.
And, because many issues are complex, this gives you a chance to get into
the complexities and details that there won't be room for in parts one and
three.)

3) Short summary at the end of your answer, preceded by the
word "so." (This is the most important part of your answer. It is the part
most likely to be used as the actual quote in the journalist's story. For
broadcast, it is the "sound bite." It has to have the sound and feel and rhythm
and flow of a sound bite, which puts everything together in a quick, simple
summary that is easy to understand and flows smoothly without hesitation.
It is a condensed version of what you just said earlier in the middle part of
your answer. It can be longer than the short summary you gave at the
beginning of your answer. For broadcast, it should be about fifteen seconds,
which is usually two or three very short sentences. You should memorize
this sound bite, especially for the first answer to the first question. If you
should get lost during the interview, you can use this quote as a kind of "life
preserver" to cling to; you can say it while you're trying to regain your focus
and go on. Because you already know what to say in the first answer, you'll
feel more confident about the rest of the interview.)

Here is an example of an answer that has this three-part structure:
Question: Why are you against the President's tax policy?
Answer:
"It won't work." (That's the first part of your answer.)
"It won't stimulate the economy. Why not? It's structured to
benefit only the wealthiest one per cent of the population. Those people
don't consume enough to have much impact on the economy. If you want to
stimulate the economy, you have to stimulate consumption by the great
masses of the population. And there's another problem: By cutting taxes
during a recession, the government is worsening our budget deficit. That
could lead to even greater problems down the road." (That's the middle part
of your answer.)

"So: The President's tax policy benefits only a few rich people.
They don't consume enough to make a difference. And tax cuts during a
recession could actually make things worse for the economy. It's a bad
policy -- and it just won't work." (That's the last part of your answer.)

Note that this last part, the key quote or sound bite, begins with the
word "so" to cue the journalist that a summary is coming. This is especially
helpful for broadcast journalists, who will be playing the tape once they get
back to their studio -- probably under time pressure -- and will need help finding the sound bite quickly. Make sure to pause a second after saying "so." This is for editing purposes, so that the videodirector has a clean place to begin your quote, without the word "so." (Otherwise the quote might sound odd, beginning with "so" but coming after another element in the story that doesn't set up a summary quote from you.) You can vary this approach in your other answers during the interview by preceding the sound bite at the end with other phrases such as "Let me sum it up this way." Also note that the last three or four words of this sound bite are what people will remember the most, so those words should drive home your most important point, which in this case is \textit{it just won't work}. This is the "so-what," the bottom line, the thing you want listeners to take away with them.

\textbf{Develop a good relationship with the journalist.} Make yourself a valuable resource they'll turn to for help while writing the story. Tell them to feel free to call you if they have any other questions after the interview. (But don't ask them to show you the story before it runs, as this will annoy them. Journalists pride themselves on their independence, and in any case wouldn't have enough time to show you the story even if they wanted to.) Suggest other people they could talk to for more information, or other sources such as Web sites. The more the journalist stays in touch with you, the more you'll learn about how he or she plans to do the story, and you can gently warn them if they seem to be going in the wrong direction.

\textbf{Establish the ground rules for the interview.} This applies primarily to print interviews. Ask them to tell you when you are on the record. Usually everything is on the record. Journalists are taking notes when they are on the phone to you. If in doubt, assume that what you say will appear in print or broadcast the way you said it.

\begin{itemize}
  \item Understand the terms used in the ground rules of interviews:
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      \item \textbf{On the record} means every word may be quoted and may be attributed to you by name: "Mary Jones said, 'This is good'."
      \item \textbf{Off the record} is useless and journalists hate it. Technically, it means they cannot use the information in any way whatsoever, not even to guide them in deciding when to do the story and what to say, but often it creates misunderstandings and disputes later as to what each side thought it meant. The best way to make sure journalists do not act on some information you have is to not mention it at all. If you do want to give them some information but not have them quote you, use "on background" or "not for attribution" (see below)
      \item \textbf{On background} means information that is not a quote and\end{itemize}
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not attributable to you but that may be summarized in the story. For example, you might say: "On background: next week there will be an important announcement." In the story, the journalist might write: "An important announcement is expected next week." After saying something on background, tell the journalist: "Now let's go back on the record" so it is crystal clear to both of you where you are with the ground rules at this point.

○ **For guidance** is similar to **on background**. For example, you're steering them away from the wrong conclusion but they can't quote you or imply they got the guidance from you.

○ **Not for attribution** means a quote but not attributable to you by name. You can negotiate with the journalist over the exact wording of the attribution and suggest they use a phrase such as "a University of Michigan official said" or "a Midwestern university source said" or "a leading educator said" etc.

*Study other interviews.* The best example of effective communication during interviews is *Meet the Press* or the other Sunday morning news interview shows. You will see interviewees applying all the principles in these media training notes. Tape the show and play it back, carefully analyzing each word in the answer and why it is there.

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**During the Interview**

*Keep repeating your main point.* The more you repeat your main point, the more control you gain over the process and the more likely the journalist will use this quote or sound bite. You should state it as the first and last part of your first answer to the first question. (See above, "Structure your answer in three parts.") Then, in succeeding questions and answers, try to work it in two or three more times. Even if it's a non sequitur, say it anyway, possibly preceded by such words as "But once again let me make my main point." On television, viewers don't notice non sequiturs.

*Give examples.* It's always easier for a listener to grasp a difficult or abstract concept if you can relate it to something concrete. Try to give only one example, though, rather than two or three, as giving too many is confusing. "U-M has made major contributions to medicine. For example, we helped develop the polio vaccine."

*Talk about yourself.* It's easier for a listener to follow your point if you relate it to your own experience. That helps make the interview more human and friendly. And it might make you more relaxed, since it's often
easy to talk about things you know. Being more relaxed, you're more likely to smile -- and an occasional smile, when appropriate, works well in interviews. Here's an example of talking about yourself: "Affirmative action helps all students get a better education. I'm a teacher, and I've seen it myself. For example, one day in class we were discussing law enforcement issues, and two students had surprisingly different views....." etc.

Tell a story. People (especially journalists!) love stories, and you're more likely to hold their attention if you can include a brief narrative or anecdote that illustrates your main point.

Don't repeat a negative. If the journalist asks you to comment on some allegation or criticism of you, don't repeat the allegation in your answer. Otherwise listeners will remember only the allegation. Instead, just reply "no" and then state something positive. For example, if asked "Have you violated ethics rules?" you reply: "No. All of our research has been carefully reviewed and fully approved by the review board." The wrong answer would be: "No, we have not violated ethics rules," because all the listener will remember is something about how you violated ethics rules.

Say if you don't know the answer. There's nothing wrong with being straightforward and saying you don't know something. Try to offer something positive after you say that. For example, "I don't have the facts in front of me now but I'll get them to you" or "I can't say that but what I can say is this: We're expecting a new report next month that will....." etc.

If you do know the answer but cannot say it because the information is secret or not yet ready for release to the public: You could say "I don't have any information I can share with you on that. But I can say this:....." and then go on to a subject you are comfortable discussing in public. That way you don't look as if you are hiding something. Nor are you being misleading. You don't want to say "I don't know" if you do know, because eventually it will come out that you knew.

If you stumble.... It's normal to stumble during an answer, or to say "uh" and have long pauses and hesitations that disrupt the smooth flow. When that happens, just say "Let me say that again," pause a second, then repeat your answer. You want a nice flow to your sentences. If you must pause, do it before a sentence, not in the middle.

Look at the interviewer, if the interview is being videotaped, or directly into the camera, if it is a live shot. Try to maintain eye contact as long as possible. If you feel you need to look away, for example while you're trying to think of an answer, try to look down rather than up or sideways. Looking down conveys being thoughtful, but looking up or sideways conveys being unsure or evasive. You might jot down three key
words on a piece of paper, and glance down at it briefly to remind you of your talking points and give you something to look at so you will not look up or sideways.

*Gestures are fine.* Feel free to use your hands, as it might help you relax and express yourself better. Just make sure not to brush against the microphone, as that will cause a loud noise!

*Wear appropriate clothes for a TV interview.* Try to avoid patterns and instead go for solid colors. A dark blazer or jacket works well. A light blue shirt or blouse works better than a white one. Make sure nothing is askew, such as a jacket riding up behind you or a tie knot that is off kilter (check in a mirror); this is to make sure viewers are not distracted from your main point.