

SPEAKING TO THE MEDIA: Roadmap for a successful interview (CheatSheet)

This handout expands on the presentation 'Speaking to the Media: Roadmap for a Successful Interview.' Use it as a toolkit for preparing, practicing, and following up after media interactions. It includes checklists, templates, and examples to help you communicate with confidence.

Media Inquiry

A “media inquiry” is when the media calls. When the media calls you should:

1. **Ask the reporter:** Name, News outlet, topic they’re reporting on, sample questions on what they would like to ask, and their deadline.
 - a. **Note:** we have to work with the reporter’s deadline and either schedule and do the interview before their deadline or draft a written statement before their deadline.
2. **Stay professional:** Thank the reporter for reaching out. This will help build credibility and a relationship with the reporter. Even under high stress, always be polite.
3. **Loop in your Communications Team or designated media person:** If you’re not a member of the Communications Team, always let the designated media person or spokesperson know that you spoke to the media. Give them the information you gathered.
4. **Set Boundaries:** Avoid ambush interviews. It’s better to prepare with your talking points.

Preparing for the Interview

1. **Craft your talking points:** Talking points outline the main points you want to share with the public. Think of 2–3 main points with supporting facts.

Template:

Main Point #1

- Supporting Point #1
- Supporting Point #2

EXAMPLE:

Mountain Charlie Road is a complex landslide.

- Repairs require significant funding, permits, and time.
- It’s still an active landslide moving 1 inch per week.

During the Interview

2. Dos and Don'ts

Dos	Don'ts
<p>Prepare your talking points (2–3 clear messages).</p> <p>Keep it simple: short sentences, plain language, avoid jargon & acronyms.</p> <p>Stick to your key message: return to it often.</p> <p>Use “we” or “the Department” instead of “I”: You're representing the department or organization.</p> <p>Be truthful and accurate: if you don't know, say so and offer to follow up with the details.</p> <p>Stay composed and professional: even if the questions are tough.</p> <p>Use bridging statements to guide the conversation back to your message.</p> <p>Assume everything is on the record.</p>	<p>Don't wing it: unprepared answers can go off track.</p> <p>Don't argue with the reporter: stay calm and respectful even during high stress situations or difficult questions.</p> <p>Don't repeat negative language from a question (it can become the headline).</p> <p>Don't overload with details: focus on clarity over complexity.</p> <p>Don't say “no comment.” Redirect with what you <i>can</i> share instead. Use bridge statements if needed.</p> <p>Don't forget body language: confidence shows in tone and posture.</p>

3. Repeating Negative Language vs. Positive Framing

Avoid repeating negative language. Why? Because framing matters! When you repeat negative words from a reporter's question, like "waste," "fail," or "incompetent," that negative is what the public remembers and what may end up as the headline.

Instead of reinforcing the reporter's framing, shift to your own positive message.

Below are some examples to highlight how you can reframe negative question into a positive response:

Infrastructure Examples:

Question (Reporter): Why is your department wasting taxpayer money on this project?	
Bad Response (repeats negative): "We are not wasting taxpayer money on this project." Headline risk: <i>"Department denies wasting taxpayer money."</i>	Better Response: "This project is a smart investment that improves safety and saves money long-term."
Question (Reporter): "Isn't it true that the County has completely failed to maintain Mountain Charlie Road?"	
Bad Response (repeats negative): "No, we haven't completely failed to maintain Mountain Charlie Road." Headline risk: <i>"County denies failing road maintenance."</i>	Better Response: "Mountain Charlie Road is a complex project, and we are committed to finding a safe, long-term solution. "

Public Health Examples:

Question (Reporter): "Isn't your department failing to control the spread of this disease? "	
Bad Response (repeats negative): "We are not failing to control the spread of this disease. " Risky headline: "Department denies failing to control disease."	Better Response: "Our team is working around the clock to protect the community and provide resources that slow the spread."
Question (Reporter): "Some residents say the vaccine program is unsafe , what do you say?"	
Bad Response (repeats negative): "The program is not unsafe. " Risky headline: "County denies unsafe vaccine program."	Better Response: "Our vaccine program is closely monitored by experts and designed to keep residents safe. "

Housing & Homelessness Examples:

Question (Reporter): "Why has the County completely failed to reduce homelessness? "	
Bad Response (repeats negative): "No, we haven't completely failed to reduce homelessness." Risky headline: "County denies failure on homelessness."	Better Response: "Homelessness is a complex challenge, and we are investing in long-term housing solutions and expanding services to make real progress."
Question (Reporter): "Isn't your program just wasting money on shelters that don't work?"	
Bad Response (repeats negative): "We are not wasting money on shelters that don't work." Risky headline: "Program denies wasting money on shelters."	Better Response: "Shelters are a critical safety net that provide stability and connect people to permanent housing and support services."

4. Bridging Statements Menu

Short sentences known as "**bridging statements**" are used to respond to a reporter's inquiry and then skillfully steer the discussion back to your main point.

Consider them the steering wheel of an interview: you still have influence over the direction of your responses even when the reporter poses the questions.

They are beneficial because:

- By acknowledging the question, they demonstrate respect.
- By returning your attention to your talking points, they help you stay on course.
- They keep you from becoming mired in difficult or unfavorable inquiries.

Below is a menu of several bridging statements to consider and examples:

"That's one perspective, but what's important is..."
"That's important, and what I want to share is..."
"That issue is part of the bigger picture, which is..."
"I see why you'd ask that, and the important thing to remember is..."
"While I can't speak to that specifically, I can share that..."

Bridging in action, below are some examples of questions a reporter might ask and how to use bridging statements to answer them.

Topic: Roads & infrastructure

Question (Reporter): "Why has the County failed to fix Mountain Charlie Road?"
Response w/ bridging statement: "The Department of Community Development & infrastructure understands why residents are frustrated. Mountain Charlie Road is a complicated situation, and what I can say is we are committed to a safe, long-term solution."

Topic: Public Health

Question (Reporter): "Isn't this virus outbreak proof that the County wasn't prepared?"
Response w/ bridging statement: "The County of Santa Cruz understands the concern from the public, and what we can share is that we have emergency response plans in place and our team is working around the clock to protect residents."

Topic: Homelessness

Question (Reporter): *"Why should taxpayers keep funding programs if homelessness hasn't gone away?"*

Response w/ bridging statement: "That's a fair question, and **what's important to know is that** homelessness is a complex issue. Our programs are connecting more people than ever to housing and services, which is real progress."

Topic: Environment

Question (Reporter): *"Isn't this cleanup just a waste of money?"*

Response w/ bridging statement: "**That's one perspective, but what's important is** that this cleanup protects public health and the environment and saves costs in the long run."

Never say: No comment! Why? Because:

- **It appears guilty or evasive.** "No comment" gives the impression to the public that you are concealing something, even if you are not.
- **It creates a gap that can be filled by others.** Without a message, the audience may assume the worst or the reporter may simply quote the unfavorable opinions.
- **It's a missed opportunity.** Each question is an opportunity to convey your main point. Rather than guiding you to what you can say, saying "no comment" closes that door.
- **It turns becomes the soundbite.** The headline might read, "County official: No comment." You don't want people to remember that message.

After the Interview

5. Checklist of things to do after your interview:

	Thank the reporter for their time! It's about building relationships with the reporter.
	Offer to send follow up information if you didn't have it while interviewing.
	Media track. It's always good to track media so you can read the article: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thank the reporter for publishing it and start building a relationship with the reporter.• Check for any misquotes or errors. If you find an error, you can email the reporter and ask for a correction.
	Always reflect on what you think you did well and what you can improve on.

6. Confidence building tips

- **Normalize nerves:** It's okay to feel nervous, but you can combat anxiety by preparing for your interview with talking points.
- **Practice out loud:** Pretend you're being interviewed. Hold your talking points and let them guide the details as you speak. Your talking points are what your outline was during speech class.
- **Anticipate tough questions:** Don't just think about what you want to say, but what the reporter might ask. Learn to use bridging techniques to prepare for difficult or negatively framed questions.
- **You are the expert:** Remember! You're the expert here. Proceed with confidence.