GOOD SCIENCE JOURNALISM

Resource for
KEMRI
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STORY STUDIO
COMMUNICATIONS

WHY SCIENCE JOURNALISM MATTERS

Science affects everyday decisions: what to eat, how to manage a health condition, whether to trust a water supply, how to respond to a disease outbreak, how to use energy and new technology.

It also influences policy, funding, business, agriculture, medicine, conservation and education. Citizens need evidence to take part in public debates – on vaccines, climate policy or genetically modified crops, for example. Good science journalism turns specialised knowledge into public knowledge, and gives readers the tools to participate in these debates rather than simply defer to experts.

Good science journalism explains why the science matters, examines the evidence carefully rather than repeating a press release, and tells a human story. It provides context, asks independent questions instead of relying only on the study's authors, and invites curiosity.

This resource is a guide for science journalists that includes: how to read a journal article, how to find independent sources, how to interview scientists, how to test a study's credibility, and how to structure the resulting story.

HOW TO TACKLE A JOURNAL ARTICLE

A journal article is not written like a news story. Your job is to find the claim, the evidence, the limitations and the public meaning quickly and responsibly.

FAST READING SEQUENCE

- Read the abstract, introduction and conclusion first.
- Read the paper again more closely, looking up words and concepts you do not understand.
- Watch for phrases such as “our findings”, “revealed”, “established”, “we found”, “we concluded” or “our measurements show”. These often point to the new and important parts.
- Check the discussion or conclusion for what the authors say should happen next. This can provide a strong kicker for your story.
- Read the figures and captions. They often contain the clearest version of the data.
- Check the acknowledgements, funding and conflict-of-interest sections.

USEFUL SHORTCUT

To understand core concepts, search for earlier press releases or explainers on EurekAlert!, university websites, PubMed, Google Scholar or other reputable sources. Do not copy them; use them to understand the terrain before interviewing.

FINDING INDEPENDENT OR OUTSIDE SOURCES

A science story should not rely only on the study authors. Independent sources help you assess the strength, novelty, limitations and public meaning of the research.

WHERE TO FIND OUTSIDE COMMENTERS

- References in the paper: authors of earlier or contrasting studies are often excellent sources.
- EurekAlert! Expert Directory and other expert-finder tools.
- PubMed, Google Scholar and ScienceDirect searches using keywords from the paper.
- University department pages, research centres, professional associations and conference programmes.
- Public information officers who can help identify relevant specialists.
- Your own professional network and previous sources.

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FINDING INDEPENDENT OR OUTSIDE SOURCES

HOW TO JUDGE WHETHER AN EXPERT IS USEFUL

- Do they publish in the field you are reporting on?
- Do they collaborate with respected academics?
- Have they reviewed journals, led projects or won relevant awards?
- Are they independent from the study authors, funders or institution?
- Have they been quoted in the media before? If so, are their comments careful and evidence-based or extreme and attention-grabbing?

CAVEAT

- Always check how possible outside commenters are connected to the authors of the current study. A scientist may appear independent but be a collaborator, former supervisor, former student or co-author.

INTERVIEWING SCIENTISTS

You do not need to become an expert before interviewing a scientist. But you do need enough preparation to know what you do not understand and to ask useful questions.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- Read the abstract, introduction and conclusion of the paper.
- Read the press release, but do not rely on it alone.
- Google the scientist and read previous news stories about their work.
- Check how this release fits into their broader research.
- Write down the terms, methods, numbers and claims you do not understand.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

- Do not feel intimidated. A non-specialist journalist often asks the questions the public would ask.
- Show genuine interest. Scientists often respond well to curiosity.
- Ask them to explain technical concepts in plain language.
- Ask follow-up questions when something is unclear.
- Paraphrase the explanation back to the scientist to check whether you have understood correctly.

INTERVIEWING SCIENTISTS

USEFUL QUESTIONS FOR SCIENCE INTERVIEWS

- What is the main finding in one sentence?
- What was the question you were trying to answer?
- Why does this matter beyond your field?
- What surprised you?
- What was most difficult or challenging about the research?
- What does this study not show?
- What would be an exaggerated or misleading headline?
- What are the next steps?

THE 10 QUESTION CREDIBILITY TEST

- What is the exact claim?
- What type of study is it?
- Who or what was studied?
- What is the size and subject of the study: cells, animals, people, models or archives?
- How representative was the sample?
- Was there a control or comparison group?
- Does the method allow causal claims, or only association?
- Who funded it, and what conflicts were declared?
- Do independent experts agree with the interpretation?
- Does the headline match the evidence?
- If the answer to several questions is “I can’t tell”, that is itself a warning sign.

FROM MEDIA RELEASE TO STORY

USE THIS SHEET WHEN WORKING FROM A PRESS RELEASE OR JOURNAL ARTICLE

What is the claim?

What is the evidence behind it?

What is the strongest limitation?

What is the “so what?” for your audience?

Who needs to be interviewed?

What would be a responsible headline?

STORY STRUCTURE

- Lead or introduction: What happened or what was found, in everyday language.
- So what: Why it matters to the audience now.
- Evidence: How the finding was produced.
- Human or local relevance: Who is affected or why this matters in real life.
- Independent view: What an outside expert says.
- Limits: What the study does not prove or what remains uncertain.
- Next steps: What happens next in science, policy, practice or public debate.

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