

Know Your Rights with MEDIA



Review the following definitions from the Associated Press to get familiar with types of news attributions.

The terms “on the record” and “off the record” require negotiation. Simply stating “This is off the record” is not enough; both parties must agree. Assume anything said to a journalist is quotable unless agreed otherwise, and no conversation is truly off the record.

On the record. The information can be used with no caveats, quoting the source by name.

Off the record. The information cannot be used for publication.

Background. The information can be published but only under conditions negotiated with the source. Generally, the sources do not want their names published but will agree to a description of their position. Reporters should object vigorously when a source wants to brief a group of reporters on background and try to persuade the source to put the briefing on the record. These background briefings have become routine in many venues, especially with government officials.

Deep background. The information can be used but without retribution. The source does not want to be identified in any way, even on condition of anonymity.

FAQ's

Do journalists allow sources to review an article before it goes to print?

No. But you can insist on “quote approval” before the interview, so that the reporter reads your quotes back to you to confirm what you said before print. You can also offer to review quotes for accuracy.

Will I get questions from reporters in advance?

Generally, no. Some journalists may send questions, but others may not have the time. Instead, they are obligated to tell you what their story is about and why they want to talk to you.

Can I be anonymous?

Yes, if you only agree to talk to a reporter if they agree to keep you anonymous. Confirm this at the start, before sharing sensitive info. Agree on what information to include or exclude. Be prepared to explain your reason for wanting anonymity so they can address it in the article.

Do I have to answer all the questions?

No, but avoid saying “no comment.” Instead, give an explanation for why you can't comment. Examples: “We can't discuss that right now,” or “We don't comment on pending litigation.”

Can I record the interview?

Yes, and you can ask if the reporter is recording. You have the right to have a colleague with you during the interview for support or to share information. If you've previously stated that a particular topic is off the table and the reporter brings it up regardless, your colleague can intervene for you.

May I request that the reporter hold off on publishing until a later date?

Yes, you may negotiate for an embargo. An embargo is the agreement that the story will not be published until a certain date or certain situation arises. Note there is no formal remedy if they publish the information anyway.

Can I turn down the interview?

Decline interviews outside your expertise, in a panel format, or that could compromise you. Panels often become debates. Accept interviews when able.

How do I steer the conversation to my talking points?

Even if the direct answer to a reporter's question doesn't allow for your point, stay on message using a pivot. *Examples:* “What's important here is...” “Let me explain something...” “That's a good question, but what is really important is...” “I'd like to make this point before I continue.”

PRE-INTERVIEW:

Never take the call cold. Ask the reporter about the area of interest and telling him or her you will have to call back.

Example: I'd like to talk, but I'm currently busy. Please share your name and number, and I'll call you back in half an hour. Also, let me know what you want to discuss for a more helpful conversation.

Do your research. Get the details on the reporter, the outlet, and previous coverage of aging services. Determine the focus of the story. Never assume you know the focus of the reporter's story, even if you have pitched it. Ask.

DURING THE INTERVIEW:

Substance. Be concise in your responses to prevent being misquoted. Don't volunteer negatives. Don't speculate or answer hypotheticals.

Don't accept a reporter's facts or characterizations of others. Always state the facts in your own terms. Repeat your key messages in each question. When you have made your point, STOP talking. If there is some silence, don't feel pressure to fill it.

POST-INTERVIEW:

Ask if the reporter has additional questions. If you've agreed to send information (e.g., a report, a link to a study, a photo) tell them when you will do that.

Reach out as soon as possible after the piece is published if you find an error in the story, or if the reporter has omitted important context. Correcting obvious factual errors is easy, but requesting major changes is harder; proof is often required. Full retractions are rare. For significant issues, editors may suggest writing a letter to the editor.

Refer to the interview. Include a link to the published story when reaching out with a new pitch or following up.