

Part III - During the Interview

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the MTAS website ([mtas.tennessee.edu](https://www.mtas.tennessee.edu)). This website is maintained daily by MTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee municipal government.

We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with municipal government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other MTAS website material.

Sincerely,

The University of Tennessee
Municipal Technical Advisory Service
1610 University Avenue
Knoxville, TN 37921-6741
865-974-0411 phone
865-974-0423 fax
www.mtas.tennessee.edu

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The first rule when dealing with any reporter on any subject is to never, never, never lie. Never.

The careers and reputations of innumerable public servants have been permanently destroyed when they told a lie to a news reporter. Once a reporter realizes he or she has been lied to, you will have no peace. It is always better to admit to a painful truth on a one-time basis than to have the news media discover a lie and spend the next several months exposing it, slowly extracting the truth. Remember, tell the truth and tell it first.

The second rule for dealing with reporters is to clearly understand the meaning of the term “off the record.” Simply stated, nothing you say to a reporter is ever off the record. The term has no legal definition and means only as much as the reporter wants it to. For all practical purposes, you should assume that every word you say to a reporter is going to appear in their story and carefully watch your words.

Sometimes public officials will make the mistake of giving a reporter “confidential” information, telling the reporter only afterward that his remarks were “off the record.” This approach does not obligate the reporter in any way. Instead, it alerts the reporter that the comments may be especially controversial and worthy of further investigation.

In other instances, a reporter may attempt to extract information from a public official by offering to keep the information “off the record.” Again, “off the record” is a vague term that can mean many things. The offer may mean the reporter will not print (or broadcast) the remarks made by the speaker, or it might simply mean that the remarks will be broadcast but not attributed to the speaker. Either way, this can have embarrassing results for the public servant.

The best strategy during a media interview is to tell the truth and insist to the reporter that every question and answer is on the record.

Here are some other techniques that will improve the quality of your media interviews:

1. Stay in control of the interview.

You don't have to wait until the reporter brings up a subject you wish to discuss. You can raise the issue on your own. This is especially important if the reporter is not asking questions that are “on message.” It's OK to politely change the subject to the points that you have decided to make. Don't let the interviewer take you into areas that are not important or not what you want to discuss. Remember, you should know the discussion topics beforehand. If the questions veer from the predetermined subjects, stay “on message” and remind the interviewer of the topics you agreed to discuss.

2. Repeat yourself.

Keep making your major points over and over. Emphasize your message numerous times so your points won't be missed or misinterpreted by the viewer or reader. Reiterate the things you want the public to understand about your topic. When a message is told repeatedly, citizens tend to remember and accept what they have heard.

3. Keep your answers short and avoid talking too much.

With radio and television news media in particular, an hour-long interview is likely to result in a story that lasts no more than a couple of minutes on the air. Most of your answers will be reduced to sound bites lasting no more than five or 10 seconds. A two-minute answer is not going to be included in the final cut of the story. Keep your answers brief and to the point. Otherwise, your comments may be used out of context or in a damaging way.

4. It is also risky to keep talking after providing a brief answer during an interview.

Intentionally or not, some reporters have a habit of arranging periods of silence between their questions during which time some interviewees feel the need to keep talking. It is during these periods that the speaker can get off message, blurting out things never intended to be said. It is not your responsibility to keep the discussion moving during an interview; let the reporter do that for you.

5. Do not read your prepared remarks—especially on television.

Your answers should appear natural and not as if you are reading from a script. This is true especially in television interviews, where reading a prepared statement almost always looks forced and unnatural.

6. Do not accept a reporter's characterizations of your remarks.

Sometimes a reporter will attempt to summarize the answers you made to a particular question, and the characterization may not be consistent with what you said. It is OK to disagree with the reporter in these instances and you should immediately correct any mischaracterizations of your remarks. This can be done politely, but there should be no doubt left that the reporter's characterizations are wrong. Don't let the reporter put words in your mouth.

7. Beware of false choices offered by reporters.

"If you aren't going to raise taxes, which city programs will you be cutting?" Be careful not to take the bait in this trap. The question assumes only two possible choices. There may be numerous alternatives to raising taxes or cutting programs. Politely explain to the reporter what those other alternatives might be.

8. Avoid making jokes when the subject is serious.

The public expects its public servants to be serious and businesslike. Attempts at humor detract from a serious image. Worse, if the joke falls flat, the speaker will look foolish. There are occasions when humor may be called for, but such instances are rare.

9. Avoid the use of jargon and technical terms.

The public is not always familiar with the various acronyms associated with government. Do not assume people listening to your interview on the radio will know what TDEC, OSHA, FOIA, EPA, FLSA, FMLA, or MTAS mean. Speak to the average citizen, not to bureaucrats and technicians.

10. Don't guess at the answers.

Never attempt to guess the answer to a question. Unless your guess is correct, your answer may appear to be untruthful. It's OK to tell the reporter that you don't have the information needed to provide an accurate answer, along with the offer to provide the answer shortly after the interview. It's OK to say you are not qualified to answer a question if the subject is outside your area of expertise or responsibility.

11. Don't answer hypothetical questions.

This is dangerous territory. Avoid answering "what if" questions. Months (or hours) after the interview, the question may no longer be theoretical and your answer may not fit the situation. Do not make predictions or assumptions.

12. Don't lose your temper.

This is especially true for television interviews where your temper will be shown in tight close-up shots of your face. But it is true for other media, as well. Keep your cool and don't let them see you sweat.

13. Eliminate distractions.

Turn off your cell phone and pager. If the interview is in your office, have your calls answered by a secretary. Radios (including police radios) and televisions should be turned off.

14. In television interviews, keep your eyes on the reporter.

It is not good to look at the microphone during a TV interview, nor will you look very good if you look directly into the camera. Instead, it is best to focus on the person conducting the interview.

15. During television and radio interviews, avoid being overly familiar with the reporter.

When dealing with local reporters with whom you are familiar, it may be OK to call the reporter by his or her first name while on the air. When dealing with reporters you do not know well, especially celebrity journalists, it is more professional to call the reporter "Mr. Brokaw" rather than "Tom." Otherwise, the public may think you're showing off. Worse, the viewer may see the interview as biased or as a publicity piece.

16. Always be positive and never attack or ridicule anyone.

If your message is a good one, the public can be sold on it with a positive, clearly articulated interview. Attacking or ridiculing opponents often backfires and can detract from the message you want to convey. Sell yourself and your ideas rather than tearing down another person.

17. Deal with hostile questions.

The reporter may ask a question that challenges your intelligence or your integrity, perhaps hoping that you'll respond in kind. Don't take the bait. Try to rephrase the reporter's question in a more positive way before answering it. Explain why your proposal or your position is good for the community, and avoid explaining why it's not bad. Emphasize the positive.

18. Assume that every microphone is on.

From the moment you enter the presence of a reporter, watch your words carefully. Assume all

microphones are on and recording your every word. Just because you do not see a microphone does not mean one is not present.

19. Show compassion.

When dealing with bad news, make an effort to express your concern for the victims (for example, people laid off when a factory closes, people hurt in accidents, people denied public benefits, etc.) Let the public see that you have a heart and that you care about the people in your community.

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