

## Sample No-Surprises Letter

(Provided, with annotations to *The Open Notebook* by Stephanie Lee, *BuzzFeed News*)

Related story: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/stephaniemlee/brian-wansink-cornell-p-hacking>

*I sent this letter to Dr. Brian Wansink in mid-February 2018. It's important to note that this was only sent after I had tried repeatedly and unsuccessfully, since the fall of 2017, to interview him. (Over the course of the last year, I've written a dozen stories about his lab, and have never spoken with him by phone.) These kinds of "no surprise" letters are last-resort attempts to reach out, after you've asked for regular interviews and then sent questions.*

Dear Dr. Wansink,

I wanted to let you know that I am working on another story about the research practices of the Food and Brand Lab. The story is based on: dozens of emails from your collaborator Collin Payne obtained through public records requests; interviews with a former member of your lab; and interviews with independent statisticians and psychology researchers.

The reporting shows that, between 2008 and 2016, you and your collaborators have aggressively mined datasets for results to a degree far beyond what is regarded as sound scientific practice.

Independent researchers were unambiguously critical in their assessment of this correspondence. One told me the behavior on display was "p-hacking on steroids," while another described you as "a consistent and repeated offender of statistics." Another said, "I am sorry to say that it is difficult to read these emails and avoid a conclusion of research misconduct."

I would very much like to include your perspective in this story. Please let me know if you'd like to chat by phone (XXX-XXX-XXXX), or feel free to do so by email. If you'd like to be included in the story, I'll need to hear from you before Wednesday at 10am EST.

*[We tend to give a deadline of a couple of days to a week, depending on the nature of*

*the story. But setting a deadline for a response is important because it indicates that the story is close to being published, and their response is needed in a timely manner.]*

Here are the facts I intend to include in the story that pertain to you. Again, if you have any comments or clarifications, please let me know as soon as possible.

*[What followed were bullet points that hewed closely to the language of the draft as it was written at the time. First, I laid out the general arguments of the story. Then I detailed the specific allegations being made, such as questions about the accuracy of two papers and critiques made by a former lab member in an interview.]*

Below are summaries of the emails of yours that I plan to quote, sorted by study when applicable:

*[Here, I listed every study that I planned to discuss in the story, followed by excerpts of the emails relevant to the studies. I also listed other excerpts that weren't about specific studies, and explained how they would be interpreted and presented in the story.]*

Again, I am eager to hear your side of the story. Please let me know if you'd like to talk.

Thanks,

Stephanie