

# Planning interviews with scientist sources

*Science reporting quick tips from [SciLine](#) and [The Open Notebook](#)*

**Interviewing scientists may seem overwhelming at first, but it isn't fundamentally different from talking with other sources. A little planning can help ensure that your time with researchers and other science experts is well spent and that you get the information you need.**

Figure out whom to talk to.

- If you're covering a scientific study, you'll need to speak with [at least one of the authors](#) and one or more outside sources who can evaluate and comment on the study.
- How many sources you need depends on whether you have wide-ranging versus focused questions, how long your story is, and whether the subject sparks debate among scientists. More debate demands more sources.
- Make sure the sources you contact have [expertise relevant to your specific story](#). Read through researchers' faculty profiles to learn more about what they study.

Make your [email requests](#) easy to read and respond to.

- In the subject line, include the phrase "media inquiry" and a few words about your story's topic so your source knows it's relevant to them. If your request is time-sensitive, note that (e.g., "on deadline") in the subject, too.
- In the email itself, start by introducing yourself and the publication you're writing for.
- Be clear about your ask. Are you writing about their study? Wanting comment on another study? Looking for general background on a topic? Including scientific information as part of a bigger story?
- Explain where you are in your reporting process — whether that's working on a freelance pitch, in initial stages and looking for background, or trying to answer some specific questions.
- Include your deadline and be honest about the time frame you're working with. Giving a source an extra hour or two to respond, if possible, might be the difference between getting an interview or not.

Don't wing it! Plan some interview questions ahead of time.

- If you're covering a study, [make sure you read it](#), so you can [develop informed questions](#).
  - ▶ Ask an author questions like: Can you summarize the findings for me? How did you do this study? What sets this apart from other work on the topic?
  - ▶ Ask an outside source questions like: Do the results support the authors' conclusions? How does this fit in with what we already know? What limitations do you see?
- If you're covering a local issue such as a weather event, an environmental debate, or a city council decision, think about what information will be valuable to your audience. Focus on a [couple of essential questions](#), and then list some extras that it would be nice to get to.
  - ▶ Look for your news peg. If it's not a newly released study or breaking news, ask: Why is this issue in the news right now, or deserving to be?
  - ▶ If you're covering breaking news, focus on the journalism classics: who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- If you're working on a feature story, ask broader questions like: How did you get into this field? What inspired this study? Why does this research matter?
- Close interviews by asking about researchers' next steps and what lingering questions remain.

▶ Further reading: [how to excel at interviewing](#) and [possible interview questions](#).