

MEDIA RELATIONS GUIDELINES FOR WPI FACULTY



Worcester Polytechnic Institute

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WHY ENGAGE WITH THE MEDIA?

The media provide important outside perspective on WPI's stories, and an editorial presence provides credibility to your work.

They not only provide a spotlight for your research and expertise—and to the university by extension—but they also provide their audiences with an informed perspective and a “pure” source of information that people are more inclined to trust. This is helpful to them, and it helps you—and WPI—establish a stronger reputation for excellence.

Reporters love to report on what's new or timely: important issues and discoveries, and interesting facts and perspectives. They want to know what's first, best, and unique. They are also looking for sources who can provide information that is relevant to others. On top of it all, they are in the human interest business, and they want to tell the stories behind the stories... the ones with heart, and the ones that face controversy head-on.

They work under intense time pressures, and they need us to be responsive. Often we must be fast, but never at the expense of accuracy. Sometimes your interview will result in a feature, but more often your contribution will be a piece of a bigger story.

WPI has a team of public relations experts who want to work with you. Our expertise is not only in successfully engaging media to cover our stories, but we also work on the back end of the story so that our faculty are “media ready” and are prepared to maximize their time spent with reporters.

WHY WORK WITH WPI'S PR AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS EXPERTS?

Like you, we've spent many years learning our business and honing our skills:

- We are expert storytellers and we know which tools will work best for each individual story.
- We know how best to vet media requests, and develop the stories you'd like to tell.
- We have expertise with the good news and the bad news.
- We have outstanding relationships with many reporters and editors at the local, regional, and national level—and within the trade media.
- We can help you define your key messages and provide you with media training.
- We're eager to share news about the work being done by WPI faculty, researchers, administrators, and students with the world.
- We ensure media follow-up.

We also really want to know what's happening with you.

- Are you doing any work that is visually interesting?
- Is your work changing the world—even just a corner of it—for the better?
- Do you have a student or teams of students working on anything that might be of interest to the public?
- Have you achieved a breakthrough or a reached a milestone?
- Are you about to be published?
- Will you be delivering a speech?

We want to help you join national conversations—or even better, help you start them.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE A STORY YOU'D LIKE TO TELL

WPI's Public Relations and Strategic Communications team has the expertise to help determine how best to share your story or vantage points via these tools:

- Press Releases
- Media Advisories
- Written Articles
- Story Pitches
- Social Media
- Videos
- Op-Eds
- Letters to the Editor
- Editorial Board Meetings
- In-person Media Visits
- FAQs
- Backgrounders/White Papers
- Media Events

NOTE: If you have a story you would like to share with the WPI Community, contact Marty Luttrell at x4690 or mluttrell@wpi.edu.

WHAT TO DO IF A REPORTER CALLS

If you receive calls from reporters, ask them if you can give them a call back. This will give you a chance to organize your thoughts. Be sure to get their names, media outlets, deadlines, and contact information.

Then, email us at media@wpi.edu (we do check it regularly).

Or, contact:

Alison Duffy

Director of Public Relations

x6656, amduffy@wpi.edu

Reporters' deadlines often require a rapid response; if you agree to be interviewed, we must be able to respond quickly.

MEDIA RELATIONS—YOU AND YOUR MESSAGES

Media Relations is really more about your messages than their questions...

As faculty, you are not only experts, you are also professional question answerers. But are you excellent message bearers? Can you walk away from an interview feeling confident that what you wanted to say—what you wanted the reporter to know about you, your work, etc.—is what you actually said and what the reporter heard?

To be successful, you need be able to communicate confidently and comfortably. It may sound counterintuitive, but being comfortable actually requires preparation, perspective (on the reporter and their angles/demands), and practice.

Mass media has finite parameters. **You need to consider your THREE KEY MESSAGES AND THEIR SUPPORTING POINTS. You will also want to practice delivering your messages and creating “sound bites” that will help the reporters illustrate their story with “pictorial” language.**

The good news is that we can help. And getting started is as easy as an email (media@wpi.edu) or phone call (x6656).

BEST PRACTICES FOR MEDIA RELATIONS

Your words are your responsibility... Remember that your words are your gift—unless you make them your enemy. Reporters can't report what you don't say, so only say what you would be comfortable seeing in quotes. You aren't responsible for the reporter's perspective or angle—and you do not have any control over what is ultimately written. You are only responsible for your own words. Your words will help the reporters gain understanding, as well as a fair and balanced perspective.

Use words that reporters can use... When talking to reporters, it's also important not to use jargon—including invented words or ideas, and avoid technical language. Reporters are telling stories at a fourth-grade reading level, so words that are pretentious, obscure, or flowery won't get picked up. In other words, pretend you are explaining something to a favorite grandparent.

Passion counts... If you present your information in a way that does not convey your deep interest or conviction, or if you deliver information in a passive voice, the reporter may perceive you as a poor, evasive, and insubstantial source. Use descriptive words. Give analogies and examples. Strong opinions resonate, as do solid data points. Counterpoints are important to "fair and balanced" reporting.

No such thing as "off the record"... Even if the reporter seems like a trustworthy person, or if your interview has formally ended, anything you say can be used in print or video. Don't say anything you wouldn't want attributed to you.

Preparation is vital... To help you, we can ask reporters about their focus and direction, their specific questions, what they know, believe, and/or assume, as well as who else they've spoken to.

Expect a challenge... Even during an interview for a positive story, be ready for the reporter to bring up more controversial topics or ask difficult questions. We can provide you with tips and training to help manage the interview so you can ensure that your messages are not lost.

"No comment" is not an option... Not all exchanges with the media are warm and fuzzy—especially in a crisis. We want the media to cover our good news, but we must expect they will also cover our bad news. We can help you find ways to respond to tricky questions.

Brevity helps... No one wants to give an interview that goes nowhere. If you want your messages in the story, you need to provide simple, illustrative sound bites and quotes. You must avoid rambling at all costs.

We can ask for a correction... If the reporter makes a major mistake while quoting you, all is not lost because we can ask for a correction. But if there is a minor error, it may not be worth the effort. We can help make that determination.

SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWS IN A NUTSHELL

Set the Stage:

- Establish a positive rapport with the journalist by showing a helpful attitude.
- Understand who their audience is, and what messages will be most meaningful to them.
- Ask about the focus and direction of the story, and learn what the reporter already knows, believes, and assumes. Also review previous stories.
- Learn who has been interviewed already and where you fit into the story.
- Set your own agenda. Continue to focus your comments on your key messages. Use the “quotable quotes” that you’ve practiced.

Tips for Getting Quoted:

- Be accessible and provide a fast, timely response.
- Have a strong opinion and say what isn’t being said by others.
- Keep the local or national vantage point in mind.
- Use quantifiable but simple data and provide usable, interesting facts.
- Use colorful, descriptive words, active language, analogies, and examples.
- Avoid dense and/or negative language.

Avoid Using These Quote Killers:

- Long Sentences
- Overly Technical Language
- Hedging or Evasiveness
- Being Passionless or Lacking Conviction
- Using Jargon (uncommon or obscure phrases; made up words, names, concepts; acronyms and abbreviations; etc.)

Use the “Never Do” List:

- Never go “off the record.”
- Never say “no comment.”
- Never speculate, guess, or lie.
- Never slam “competitors” or colleagues.
- Never lose your temper... even if the reporter is hostile or unfair. (You must always remain calm.)
- Never lose your patience with a reporter, especially one who doesn’t know your area of expertise.
- Never stray from your key messages.

TIPS ON INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

Raise a Flag for Your Important Points

- “What’s important is that...”
- “The key issue is...”
- “Our big surprise...”
- “The most compelling...”

Use a Bridge to Redirect the Conversation

- “...given the facts, it’s important to...”
- “...what we’ve noticed is...”
- “...while that’s a concern, what we really hope is that...”
- “...but, by focusing on the long term...”

If You Need to Correct the Reporter

- “...given the facts, it’s important to...”
- “There is reliable data that shows...”
- “In the event you haven’t seen X report, you should really check it out.”
- “I know you want to get this right, so allow me to clarify something for you.”

Answering Four Kinds of Difficult Questions

- The False Alternative: The interviewer presents two wrong answers for you to choose. Don't choose either; instead, set the record straight.
- The Irrelevant Question: When an unimportant question takes you in a direction that you neither need nor want to go, you can use a bridge to say something like, "While that's an interesting question, what I can tell you is..."
- The Hypothetical Question: These questions usually focus on unlikely or unpredictable situations. You can avoid engaging by using a bridge to get back to one of your key messages. For example, "While it is impossible to predict X, what's important for you to know is Y."
- The Rumor Question: Don't ask reporters the source of their information. Instead, be as truthful as you can but deflect gossip by saying something like, "I'm not at liberty to discuss that at this time, but if anything develops that I can share, I will let you know."

TIPS FOR RADIO INTERVIEWS

- Maintain high energy throughout.
- Speak clearly and conversationally.
- Keep your answers brief. Once you make your point, stop speaking.
- To help eliminate "um" and "uh" from your speech, just take a brief pause.
- Sarcasm, humor, and innuendo are tricky and easily misinterpreted... be careful when using them.
- If "phoning it in," use a land line and eliminate distractions. Stand up while talking to keep your energy levels high.

TIPS FOR TV INTERVIEWS

- Look at the reporter, not the camera... unless it's a remote, in which case you look straight into the camera as though it were a person.
- If on a panel, look at the person asking questions, or at fellow panelists.
- Your facial expression should always be friendly and engaged.
- Use gestures sparingly; too much movement can be distracting.
- Your clothes can be colorful, but they should not have busy patterns or stripes, which are distracting; solids are best. Reflective accessories, like dangling earrings, can also be distracting.
- If you wear eyeglasses, clean them thoroughly before the interview.
- Good posture matters.
- Speak clearly and conversationally.
- Keep your answers brief... Once you make your point, stop speaking.
- Repeat the interviewer's question in your answer. (Often the interviewer will be edited out.)
- To help eliminate "um" and "uh" from your speech, just take a brief pause.
- Sarcasm, humor, and innuendo are tricky and easily misinterpreted... be careful when using them.

AN OP-ED OR A LETTER TO THE EDITOR?

You are an expert with deep knowledge and important insights; you are bound to have interesting opinions to share.

Your expertise has the potential to help inform the public about important issues, insights, or oversights. And, as an informed citizen and consumer of media, you might also just want to weigh in on stories that are in the news.

Either way, editorial pages can help you inform and influence public opinion, as well as political leaders and policy makers.

This type of writing requires clarity and persuasiveness, and it differs from what you might construct for a professional journal in that it is much shorter and more personal. It must also be timely and address issues that are currently in the news.

- Op-eds feature self-contained arguments that can stand alone. They are typically 600 to 750 words.
- Letters to the Editor provide a direct response to an article that has appeared in a publication. They must usually be sent within one or two days after the original story appears in a daily publication, or in the next issue of monthly or quarterly publication. Letters to the Editor are usually kept to between 150 to 250 words, so you must write succinctly and get to your point quickly.

TIPS FOR WRITING OP-EDS

Op-eds feature self-contained arguments. These pieces can stand alone and are typically 600 to 750 words, but you should always check the guidelines provided by each publication regarding their preferred length.

When you write an Op-ed, it's best to have a publication in mind; different publications have different styles, lengths, and tones, and you will have greater success with tailored pieces.

Select topics that align with your area of expertise. Publications are more inclined to publish your pieces if they:

- Are provocative and succinct—and argue only your side of an issue; not all sides.
- Can be comprehended by all readers. (Know your audience!)
- Are written in an active voice, but a moderate tone. (Also, be sure not to use acronyms, jargon, or academic language.)
- Focus on groundbreaking research, major events, current issues, political developments, and pending or recent legislation.
- Alert the public about an impending trend.
- Identify a new and important issue of public concern—either social, political, or economic.
- Offer a new and different perspective on an ongoing local, regional, national, or global issue.
- Provide fresh new insights about significant anniversaries of major events.
- Give interesting perspective to holidays.

NOTE: Op-eds written with longer “shelf lives” will have a much greater chance of getting published.

TIPS FOR WRITING LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

When you have an opinion about an article that has recently appeared, a Letter to the Editor will allow you to provide a direct response. Most commonly, these letters are written to either support and/or expand on something stated in a news article; to make a point that was omitted in the piece; to express disagreement, or even to correct misinformation.

For daily publications, it is important that you submit your Letter to the Editor within two days of the publication of the article you will be referencing. For periodicals, you will want to respond in time for the publication's next issue. Each publication has its own guidelines for length, and Letters to the Editor can range from 100-250 words; find out the length preferred by the publications you're addressing.

Publications are more inclined to publish your pieces if they:

- Follow the typical format; "Regarding Article X, (date), I think it's important to note that..."
- Focus only on one important point.
- Use verified (and verifiable) facts.
- Avoid jargon or acronyms.

Whenever possible, you should also:

- Indicate how readers will be affected by the information/opinion that you're sharing.
- Signal a need for action – you can even call out legislators, leaders, etc. by name (however, your message should never insult anyone).
- Point people to additional sources of information.