

# Student Notebook: Communicating Psychological Science—Why It Matters and How to Get Started

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As psychology students, research is the cornerstone of our training and our long-term career goals. For many of us, our work is motivated by a belief that psychological science has a key role to play in addressing some of the most urgent problems of our time, from the climate crisis and widening partisan divides to implicit bias and the rise of fake news. Our undergraduate and graduate training emphasizes the importance of communicating our work to fellow psychologists, whether through the peer-review process or presentations at conferences. However, we learn much less about sharing our research with the public—and that has to change.

## Why Communication Matters

Many of us know the frustration of seeing our area of interest misrepresented in the news or misunderstood in our communities. Representations of psychology in policy conversations, on social media, and in the news are often inaccurate, sometimes with dangerous consequences. Within the realm of clinical psychology, we are still grappling with the gap between research and real-world practice. Decades of research have demonstrated that some treatments are more effective than others, but widespread dissemination and implementation of evidence-based practice remains one of the most intractable challenges facing the field (Baker, McFall, & Shoham, 2008).

When we fail to communicate our work to a broader audience, we miss out on opportunities to amplify its impact. On a personal level, individuals and families lose access to the insights and interventions that could improve their lives and reduce suffering. Organizations and systems function less efficiently. And at the policy level, psychological science risks being overlooked in decisions about health care, education, and funding. With science under attack and so much at stake, it is more important than ever that psychological scientists enlist their skills to communicate strategically and persuasively to the public.

## **How to Communicate Science to the Media**

Before I started graduate school, my work focused on helping advocacy and research organizations elevate their work to the national stage. Here's what I learned about how to generate and maintain media interest in a topic, respond to current events, and communicate effectively to a lay audience.

### **General Best Practices**

Regardless of the topic or venue, it is crucial to consider the audience. What is their familiarity with the topic? Why should they care about what you have to say? How does your work connect to what people are already talking about? For any public-facing materials, keep your language concise, clear, and free of academic jargon and acronyms. Use hyperlinks instead of citations and a reference list. Consider writing at an 8th-grade reading level to make sure that your ideas are accessible to as many readers as possible.

If you are speaking with the media or to a public audience, prepare talking points in advance to distill the most important takeaways. These topline messages should make clear connections between your work and the issues that are most likely to resonate with your audience (e.g., a major breaking news story or ongoing debate). When in doubt, return to these key points. If there are certain questions or controversies that come up frequently in your area of interest—or that you can anticipate being a concern for a lay audience—consider preparing and practicing answers to these questions in advance.

As graduate students, our words reflect on our mentors and academic communities more broadly. Consider university policy and check in with your advisors before communicating with the media.

### **Proactively Communicating Your Work**

**Op-eds.** One great way to bring attention to your research is by submitting an op-ed to a local or national paper or to an online outlet such as HuffPost or Medium. If you have a specific outlet in mind, check its website for detailed guidelines and submission information. Op-eds should be between 500 and 800 words and often start with a 'hook' that ties the piece to current events or an upcoming holiday (e.g., Veterans Day, a bill being debated in Congress). If you are submitting to a local paper, demonstrate how your topic affects that community specifically. Keep paragraphs short and conclude with a call to action so that readers have a clear sense of what to do with the information you have provided. To increase the chances of your op-ed getting placed, it can be helpful to call or email the op-ed or editorial page editor in advance to gauge their interest. If your first-choice media outlet declines, you can always submit the piece to another newspaper or online outlet.

Building relationships with reporters. If you have noticed a reporter who writes on a topic related to your area of research, you can reach out by email or phone to make them aware of your research and start to build a relationship. If there is significant overlap, they may want to schedule an in-person meeting to hear more about your work and determine how you might be a resource in their reporting.

## **Reacting to Relevant Current Events**

Letters to the editor. Letters to the editor are shorter than op-eds (150–200 words) and are usually written in response to something the newspaper recently reported on. For example, if I read an article in my local paper about family separation at the border, I might write a letter to the editor to provide information about the detrimental consequences of early traumatic experiences.

Handling media requests. Reporters are always looking for sources to provide expert commentary and answer questions about the topics they are covering. If a reporter calls you, you do not have to answer their questions immediately. You can ask to schedule the interview for a later time or ask to respond to their questions in writing. You can also ask for more information about the types of questions they have. Consider your level of competency—it is absolutely OK to refer reporters to someone with more expertise. If you do not want to be quoted but want to offer general information, you can offer to speak to the reporter “on background.” However, there is a *never* a guarantee that you will not be quoted directly (i.e., “on the record”). A reporter at a prominent newspaper once printed an e-mail exchange with me verbatim.

When the news gets it wrong. You may want to set up a Google news alert to keep track of media coverage of your topic. If you stumble across reporting that is inaccurate or unhelpful, you can call or e-mail the reporter who wrote the story to provide feedback. When you see your area of interest being misrepresented (or represented well) in popular media, it can be a great opportunity to educate a broader audience—whether by reaching out to a reporter covering entertainment, penning an op-ed, or weighing in on social media.

Psychological scientists are well-positioned to shape crucial conversations and policy decisions about the most pressing issues of our time, but our voices are often absent. If we want our research to make an impact beyond the lab, learning to communicate our work to the media and the public is more important than ever.

## **References**

Baker, T. B., McFall, R. M., & Shoham, V. (2008). Current status and future prospects of clinical psychology: Toward a scientifically principled approach to mental and behavioral health care. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 9(2), 67–103.  
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