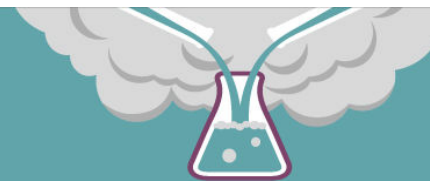


# EXPERIMENTAL ERROR



## Can I quote you on that? Tips to help scientists talk to the press

By [Adam Ruben](#) | Jan. 25, 2021 , 1:20 PM

I've probably talked to the media more than the average scientist has. In fact, sometimes I *am* the media. So when I received a random email from a television news program last month asking to interview me, I thought I knew what I was doing. All I'd have to do—I told myself—was candidly, plainly, maybe even amicably answer the questions as they came.

Oldest delusion in the book.

The topic was Dr. Jill Biden's choice to use her doctoral honorific. I don't know Dr. Biden—which is odd, I guess, given that we're both from Delaware, and our state only has like 40 people—but I wrote [a column](#) a few years ago about Ph.D.s choosing whether to use the title "doctor," so presumably they thought I could speak on the topic. And because I'm a doctor-but-not-that-kind-of-doctor who has thought about this question a bit myself, I thought I might be qualified to do so.

The interview was scheduled for 53 minutes after the email arrived. I used those 53 minutes to Google the news

### FOLLOW SCIENCE CAREERS



### Search Jobs

Enter keywords, locations or job types to start searching for your new science career.



[Register](#)  
[Advanced Search](#)

Advertisement

## Support nonprofit science journalism

Science's extensive COVID-19 coverage is free to all readers. To support our nonprofit science journalism, please **make a tax-deductible gift today.**

[Donate](#)

[Not Now](#)

I made a point to repeatedly convey that Dr. Biden has every right to use the title. Then, the interviewer asked whether I use it for myself. I said that I sometimes do, but other times it feels pretentious, especially if the scenario involves correcting someone.

I felt pretty good about the interview. I announced on Facebook and Twitter that I'd be on the news that night. Then ... I watched the program.

Some of my interview was harmless enough. But at one point, they used my answer about "doctor" sounding pretentious—without any additional context. The segment that aired made it sound as though I was calling Dr. Biden pretentious, not myself. I was now on record, on video, saying something authoritatively when I actually believe the opposite.

Since that evening, I've given a lot of thought to whether the journalist, or their editors, or their network, deliberately manipulated my words to create or enrich controversy. I even half-wrote an "I'm disappointed in your choice" email that I never sent. The reality is that I'll never know what choices were made behind the scenes. Maybe it was deliberate. But it's equally possible that it was an honest misunderstanding. Maybe my response, of which I have no record, was unclear to begin with.

## Top articles in Careers

**My university plans to terminate my department. We're trying to save it**

By Paul Bierman | Jan. 21, 2021



## Last month's Experimental Error

Experimental Error is a column about the quirky, comical, and sometimes bizarre world of scientific training and careers, written by scientist and comedian Adam Ruben.

**A 2020 holiday letter from Science Careers**



**When I encountered language barriers in my career, here's how I broke through**

By Saman Razavi | Jan. 7, 2021



**How to (seriously) read a scientific**



## Support nonprofit science journalism

Science's extensive COVID-19 coverage is free to all readers. To support our nonprofit science journalism, please **make a tax-deductible gift today.**

[Donate](#)

[Not Now](#)

et al. | Jan. 5, 2021

from the hip. Here are some tips to make sure you don't end up with unintended sentiments ascribed to you for eternity:

Advertisement

**You're providing material, not direction.** Think of a journalist as a chef and your quotes as ingredients. You can provide high-quality ingredients, but ultimately, it's the chef who decides what to cook with them. Try to respond to questions in such a way that your answers will be valuable, coherent, and complete, however they're used. Remember that your answer can, and in many cases will, become uncoupled from the interviewer's question, so it's up to you to provide context in your responses. For example, "I'm strongly in favor of it" leaves the entire spectrum of nouns for someone to misunderstand you as favoring.

**Don't just say whatever comes into your head, if you're that sort of person.** Sometimes, if I feel nervous, I'll just start sayin' stuff. It's an irresponsible practice, I know, but it happens. The result is that I sometimes end up sayin' something that's flat-out wrong. If you're like me, work on actively curbing this tendency. Fixing your habit of just sayin' stuff will help in other areas of life as well, such as the job interview where you said, "Sure, I know how to use that lab instrument," or that dating app where you said, "Sure, I feel like we have a future together."

**If you ignored that last piece of advice, backtrack.** If you say something you shouldn't have, there's nothing wrong with adding, "Oops, you know what? I'm actually not really certain if that last thing was true. Don't use that, please." Most reporters want to get the facts correct. Assuming your comment was a misstatement of a fact and not, say, an inadvertent admission of financial malfeasance, a

responsible journalist will forgive a misstatement and not put

---

## Support nonprofit science journalism

Science's extensive COVID-19 coverage is free to all readers. To support our nonprofit science journalism, please **make a tax-deductible gift today.**

[Donate](#)[Not Now](#)

childhood bullies who stuffed you in the trash can for writing an extra-credit report—but *now* who's on Channel Eight Public News, jerks? Unfortunately, the radiant glow of self-importance can backfire, because when you're being treated like an expert, it can be tempting to feel like you're supposed to be an expert on *everything*. But claiming knowledge you don't have will most likely lead to embarrassment and wasted time all around. There's nothing wrong with saying "I don't know" or even turning down an interview for which you don't feel qualified.

**Speak like a human.** You remember what that's like, right? Describe your work in plain language. After all, inscrutable highfalutin jargon is useless to a reporter—unless they're writing for the *Journal of Inscrutable Highfalutin Jargon*, which is also called the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*. Give concise answers that leave room for follow-up questions, and check in as you go to make sure the interviewer is getting what they need. Your goal is to convey, not to expound.

**Remember that most of what you say will never be shared.** Unless you're being broadcast live, your big interview, your moment of true connection, will be whittled down to a soundbite. An hourlong dialogue becomes a minute. A thorough explanation becomes a sentence. It may feel cruel, but the journalist is only doing with words what you do with research—publishing the most relevant parts and leaving the rest to die in the notebook. It's even possible that your entire interview will end up on the cutting-room floor if the piece takes a different direction, or if the journalist was interviewing you for background information or context. You might feel disappointed, but know that you helped in the way the journalist found most useful.

---

## Support nonprofit science journalism

Science's extensive COVID-19 coverage is free to all readers. To support our nonprofit science journalism, please **make a tax-deductible gift today.**

[Donate](#)

[Not Now](#)

flaws if you don't.

**When the interview is published, don't read the comments section.** In fact, never read the comments section of anything ever. I mean it. Don't say I didn't warn you.

[Read more Experimental Error stories](#)

Posted in: [Experimental Error](#), [Column](#), [Non-disciplinary](#)

doi:10.1126/science.caredit.abg7439



### Adam Ruben

Adam Ruben, Ph.D., is a practicing scientist and the author of *Surviving Your Stupid, Stupid Decision to Go to Grad School* and *Pinball Wizards: Jackpots, Drains, and the Cult of the Silver Ball*.

[Twitter](#)

## More from Careers

**Overworking tanked my health—until I began to prioritize work-life balance**



**Pandemic hit academic mothers especially hard, new data confirm**



**Hesitant about virtual networking? Adjust your approach to harness the benefits**



## Read the Latest Issue of Science

**12 February 2021**

Vol 371, Issue 6530

**BOTANY**

**Taking root**

**GENETICS**

**A revealing flaw**

## Support nonprofit science journalism

Science's extensive COVID-19 coverage is free to all readers. To support our nonprofit science journalism, please **make a tax-deductible gift today.**

[Donate](#)

[Not Now](#)



---

## Table of Contents

---

---

### SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

#### Pandemic hit academic mothers hard, data show

---

### EVOLUTION

#### Genes for life on land evolved earlier in fish

© 2021 American Association for the Advancement of Science. All rights Reserved. AAAS is a partner of HINARI, AGORA, OARE, CHORUS, CLOCKSS, CrossRef and COUNTER.

[Terms of Service](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Contact AAAS](#)

---

## Support nonprofit science journalism

*Science's* extensive COVID-19 coverage is free to all readers. To support our nonprofit science journalism, please **make a tax-deductible gift today.**

[Donate](#)

[Not Now](#)