



10 best practice guidelines for reporting science & health stories

The following guidelines, drawn up in consultation with scientists, science reporters, editors and sub editors, are intended for use by newsrooms to ensure that the reporting of science and health stories is balanced and accurate. They are not intended as a prescriptive checklist and of course shorter articles or NIBs will not be able to cover every point. Above and beyond specific guidelines, familiarity with the technicalities and common pitfalls in science and health reporting is invaluable and every newsroom should aim to employ specialist science and health correspondents. Wherever possible the advice and skills of these specialists should be sought and respected on major, relevant stories; the guidelines below will be especially useful for editors and general reporters who are less familiar with how science works.

- State the source of the story – e.g. interview, conference, journal article, a survey from a charity or trade body, etc. – ideally with enough information for readers to look it up or a web link.
- Specify the size and nature of the study – e.g. who/what were the subjects, how long did it last, what was tested or was it an observation? If space, mention the major limitations.
- When reporting a link between two things, indicate whether or not there is evidence that one causes the other.
- Give a sense of the stage of the research – e.g. cells in a laboratory or trials in humans – and a realistic time-frame for any new treatment or technology.
- On health risks, include the absolute risk whenever it is available in the press release or the research paper – i.e. if ‘cupcakes double cancer risk’ state the outright risk of that cancer, with and without cupcakes.
- Especially on a story with public health implications, try to frame a new finding in the context of other evidence – e.g. does it reinforce or conflict with previous studies? If it attracts serious scientific concerns, they should not be ignored.
- If space, quote both the researchers themselves and external sources with appropriate expertise. Be wary of scientists and press releases over-claiming for studies.
- Distinguish between findings and interpretation or extrapolation; don’t suggest health advice if none has been offered.
- Remember patients: don’t call something a ‘cure’ that is not a cure.
- Headlines should not mislead the reader about a story’s contents and quotation marks should not be used to dress up overstatement.