



Newsworthiness in a Nutshell

Former AAS Press Officer Steve Maran says, “News is what reporters want to cover, not necessarily what organizations, agencies, and institutions want to publicize.” In other words newsworthiness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder — or, in this case, the journalist. So what do journalists consider to be important? In *Science and Journalists — Reporting Science as News* (Free Press, 1986), Sharon M. Friedman writes, “Editors and reporters tend to value stories that contain drama, human interest, relevance, or application to the reader, criteria that don’t always map easily onto scientific importance.”

If scientific importance doesn’t guarantee newsworthiness, what other criteria might apply? In *The Hands-On Guide for Science Communicators* (Springer, 2007), Lars Lindberg Christensen, then at the European Southern Observatory, offers the following criteria, noting that the more of them are satisfied, the better are the chances that you have a “good story” on your hands:

- *Timing*: the event has just taken place, or the work has just been published.
- *Relevance*: the issue has influence on people’s lives or on the way they think about the world.
- *Proximity*: there’s a local angle for readers, or the event happened in a special location.
- *Implications*: the result has profound consequences.
- *Conflict*: the discovery involves a hotly debated topic or resolves a hotly contested issue.
- *Human interest*: there’s something special about the scientist or the discovery circumstances.
- *Mystery*: the finding involves a mysterious or unexpected phenomenon.
- *Significance*: an entirely new phenomenon or class of object, or a key finding in a critical field.
- *Unusual angle*: a new twist on an old result or a quantum leap in certainty about something.
- *A record*: the discovery is the first, last, oldest, youngest, biggest, smallest, fastest, slowest, etc.
- *Sexiness*: the topic is one in which people are always interested, e.g., black holes.
- *Aesthetics*: the finding is accompanied by an exceptionally beautiful image or spectacular video.
- *Distinguished publication*: the work is published in a leading, prestigious journal.
- *Coattails*: the result is related to, or piggybacks on, something else currently in the news.

In *Making the News* (Westview, 1998), Jason Salzman offers some additional criteria: *novelty, shock, simplicity, humor, involvement of a prominent person, or an anniversary*. He then lists some things that will send reporters running in the other direction. Of particular relevance to science news, that list includes *complexity*.

Here’s a useful way to tell if you have a newsworthy story: In a single paragraph of no more than 75 words, answer the questions who?, what?, when?, where?, why?, how?, and, most importantly, so what?, then show it to someone who isn’t an astronomer. If he or she is intrigued, you’ve got news. If not, you probably don’t.