

DHHS POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Section III:	Communications
Title:	Media Training Manual
Chapter:	Making Corrections
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Mistakes happen. Sometimes a reporter may not get the story right. Sometimes a reporter may miss a major point. How you handle these issues is very important. You need to contact the right person in the right way, or your future dealings with that reporter or that media outlet may be irreparably harmed. Never respond in the heat of the moment. An angry response won't be an effective response. Please consult with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Public Affairs Office before proceeding. It is always good to get a second opinion about the problem.

Always start your discussions with the reporter who was responsible for the story. Don't start over their head with an editor or a producer. If you don't get satisfaction from the reporter, then you may want to pursue the problem with others in managerial positions.

Printed or on-air corrections or clarifications are fairly rare. You have to prove that something was absolutely wrong to get a printed or on-air correction. In general, the printed or on-air correction/clarification will not run as prominently as the original story. You might be better off pursuing a different tactic, even where a printed or on-air correction may be justified.

First, ask yourself these questions:

- Is the problem the headline?
- Is the problem an obvious factual error, like a misspelled name?
- Is the problem with a quote?
- If the problem is a quote, is it an actual quote inside quotation marks or is it a paraphrase?
- Is the problem in tone?
- Is the problem that something vital was left out of the article or missed?

Headline Errors

Reporters don't write headlines. In general, they're just as resentful as you are when a bad headline gets into the paper. Call the reporter to talk with them. If the problem is bad enough you might want to pursue a correction.

You should only complain about a totally inaccurate headline, not a sloppy or stupid headline. Sometimes a story will say one thing, but the headline says exactly the opposite. That's where a complaint is in order.

Factual Errors

Misidentified individuals in picture cutlines and misspelled names are some of the most common factual errors. In the case of misidentified people or misspelled names, a printed correction is usually in order and should be gladly given. Other factual errors are harder to deal with. If the story is inaccurate--if it says you did something that you didn't do or makes that kind of error--then you want to talk to the reporter. It is up to you to decide whether you want to pursue a written correction. Sometimes you are better off convincing the reporter to do a follow-up story that corrects the original problem. It will be better read than a small written correction.

Most reporters don't make huge factual errors. We are close to our programs and often take anything said about them personally. What you perceive as a factual error may not be. That's why you should always talk with DHHS Public Affairs Office before proceeding with a complaint.

Quotation Errors

It is rare for a reporter to get a true quotation wrong. Many reporters carry tape recorders to ensure that they get the quote right.

The majority of people who complain about a quote are usually complaining about an inaccurate paraphrase---something that distills what you said but not in your own words. Think out paraphrases carefully. Most of the time they actually do get the gist of what you said, it just isn't the way you would have said it. In general, you have no redress in these situations.

If a quote is actually wrong--you're represented inside quotation marks saying something you did not say--then you can pursue a correction of some type. First, ask yourself how bad the problem is? If it is a case of just a few words that don't make any difference, you're probably better off leaving it along. You might want to watch yourself with that reporter in the future. You might tape record your future conversations. At the very least, take good notes. A really good reporter shouldn't get one word in a quote incorrectly.

In order to make your case, you need to have some documentation of what you said. It is perfectly okay to tape your interviews or have witnesses to an interview. If you are dealing with a controversial issue, this is particularly important.

Tone Problems

These are really touchy. Some reporters present a story factually and allow the reader to make up his or her own mind. Some reporters practice what's called advocacy journalism-- which means they are taking a side or advocating a particular position.

It is hard to fight advocacy journalism. You can write a letter to the editor to the publication, setting the record straight. You can write an op-ed. You can ask your program friends and advocates to write letters and op-eds. As always, treat the advocacy journalist fairly and decently. Respond to their questions quickly and accurately. Work to build a relationship with the reporter. Work to get other reporters interested in the story; maybe they'll cover it fairly.

In general, there isn't a thing you can demand of a newspaper in regards to tone. Unless you can show a continued tone, sustained over numerous stories by the same reporter. If it is truly unfair and the reporter doesn't seem to care what you say, then you may want to go higher up the food chain.

Inserting Missing Material

Sometimes reporters may miss a vital item. The best way to approach this is to call up the reporter and thank them for their interest in the issue. Talk rationally about what may have been left out and how you can help the reporter get the rest of the story. Don't make demands; you really don't have anything to demand. Be nice and explain how the missing piece may actually help readers better understand the situation.

Letters to the Editor

Sometimes you can fill in a gap or correct a problem with tone with a letter to the editor. If a letter is to have any impact at all, then it needs to follow the original news story as quickly as possible. That means getting the letter to the newspaper before close of business on the day the original story ran. If your letter runs days after the original story, then most readers will have forgotten the original story and your point will be missed.

Op-Eds

An Op-Ed is another good way to respond to a story that has gaps or problems with tone. Just as with the letter to the editor, a response Op-Ed needs to be submitted as quickly as possible after the original story runs.

For questions or clarification on any of the information contained in this policy, please contact [The Office of Public Affairs](#). For general questions about department-wide policies and procedures, contact the [DHHS Policy Coordinator](#)