



John's biography

John Humphrys

Veteran [journalist](#) & BBC Radio 4 presenter

A veteran journalist and the presenter of Mastermind, John Humphrys is known for his honesty and his direct approach to interviews.

John Humphrys' background

John Humphrys was the first of the BBC's journalists to present front-line news programmes on both television and radio. They have included Today, The Nine o'Clock News, On the Record, On the Ropes, and Panorama. In 2003 he succeeded Magnus Magnusson as chairman of Mastermind on BBC2. For ten years he was a foreign correspondent with the BBC. He has reported on major international events ranging from the Watergate crisis and resignation of Richard Nixon to the first free elections in South Africa, revolutions in Latin America and assorted wars in all parts of the globe. He was based in Washington for six years (the youngest [journalist](#) to be appointed as a foreign correspondent by BBC Television) and in Southern Africa for three years.

He began his career in newspapers. He wrote the main column for the Sunday Times for five years – until the BBC lost its nerve about its journalists writing opinion pieces. His first book, Devil's Advocate, was published in 1999 and went straight into the best-seller lists to critical acclaim. The Observer said it was “peerless reporting”. The Sunday Telegraph compared his writing with “that great publicist and arch-dissenter William Cobbett” and the Sunday Times called him a “national institution”. His second book, published in April 2001, was The Great Food Gamble and explodes the myth of “cheap” food. It, too, became an instant best-seller. His book on the English language (Lost for Words) was published in November 2004 and became an even bigger best-seller. The follow-up (Beyond Words) was published in November 2006.

John Humphrys has always attracted controversy. He was attacked publicly by a Conservative Cabinet minister in the nineties, who said his interviewing ‘poisoned the well of democratic debate’. The BBC was swamped with letters and phone calls, more than ninety per cent. of which supported him. [Politicians](#) and public figures rose to his defence, as did many newspapers. The Daily Mail described him as “one of the most brilliant journalists in the country” and the Express ran a column demanding “Humphrys for prime minister”. It concluded: “[Politics](#) would be richer, but the BBC would probably close down through lack of interest”. The Labour [leadership](#) also defended him but, within six months of the Labour government taking over, John Humphrys was being attacked by them. Downing Street demanded that the BBC do something about what it called “the John Humphrys problem”. Again the Press and public rose to his defence. Several newspapers claimed that John Humphrys wasn't the problem; he was the

solution.

He has won most of broadcasting's national awards. In one twelve-month period he was voted Political Journalist of the Year by MP's in the Channel Four Parliamentary Awards; Radio Personality of the Year by the Variety Club of Great Britain; and journalist of the year by the [Media](#) Society. In 2003 he won the Sony Gold Medal for his outstanding contribution – the “Oscar” of radio. The citation read: “He has truly changed the face of radio and the nature of the radio interview for an entire generation.” But he says his most prized is the Special Award of the Plain English Campaign.

For many years he has conducted a personal crusade to defend the English language against those who would corrupt it with Americanised jargon, meaningless business non-speak and assorted gobbledegook. His latest book also looks at the way language is corrupted by people in power. He bought a dairy farm in 1980 and made a brave – though not entirely successful – attempt to turn it into an organic operation. He tries to play the cello – with even less [success](#).

His children range in age from thirty-nine to six.

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