How to Write an Op-Ed

What is an op-ed?

An op-ed (short for opinion editorial) is a narrative essay that presents the writer's opinion or thoughts about an issue. Op-eds can raise awareness about a particular topic, aim to persuade others to take a certain position, and substantiate a writer as an expert on a subject.

Op-eds are most commonly published in daily newspapers or their digital editions. They are typically 600–700 words but can be shorter. Some op-eds are written by newspaper staff or syndicated writers, but many are submitted by the publication's readers, politicians, experts, and organizational leaders.

Tips for writing an op-ed that will get published

Track the news and jump at opportunities. Timing is essential. When an issue is dominating the news — whether it's a war, stock market panic, or just the latest controversy on a TV show — that's what readers want to read and op-ed editors want to publish. Whenever possible, link your issue explicitly to something happening in the news. If a report was just issued on declining school test scores, for instance, start off by discussing that report and how it relates to local schools. Or look ahead to a holiday or anniversary a week from now that will provide a fresh news peg (and enable editors to plan in advance to run your op-ed).

Make a single point — well. You cannot solve all of the world's problems in 700 words. Be satisfied with making a single point clearly and persuasively. If you cannot explain your message in a sentence or two, you're trying to cover too much.

Put your main point on top. You have no more than 10 seconds to hook a busy reader, which means you shouldn't "clear your throat" with a witticism or historical aside. Just get to the point and convince the reader that it's worth his or her valuable time to continue.

Tell readers why they should care. Put yourself in the place of the busy person looking at your article. At the end of every few paragraphs, ask out loud: "So what? Who cares?" You need to answer these questions. Will your suggestions help make local schools safer? Explain why. Appeals to self-interest are more effective than abstract punditry. Concentrate on the issue.

Offer specific recommendations. An op-ed is not a news story that simply describes a situation; it is your opinion about how to improve matters. Don't be satisfied with mere analysis. In an op-ed you need to offer recommendations. How exactly should the school board address an issue? What training do teachers need? You'll need to do more than call for "more research!" or suggest that opposing parties work out their differences.

Adapted from "Guidelines from Duke University's Office of News and Communications" and "Op-Ed Guidelines," News Office of Smith College

Showing is better than discussing. You may remember the Pentagon's overpriced toilet seat that became a symbol of profligate federal spending. You probably don't recall the total Pentagon budget for that year (or, for that matter, for the current year). That's because we humans remember colorful details better than dry facts. When writing an op-ed, therefore, look for great examples that will bring your argument to life.

Embrace your personal voice. The best of examples will come from your own experience. If you are a physician, describe the plight of one of your patients, and then tell us how this made you feel personally. If you've worked with poor families, tell a story about one of them to help argue your point. In other words, come down from Mt. Olympus and share details that will reveal your humanity. In so doing, your words will ring truer and the reader will care more about what you are saying.

Play up your personal connection to the readers. Daily newspapers in many cities are struggling to survive. As they compete with national publications, television, blogs and others, they are playing up their local roots and coverage. Op-ed editors at these papers increasingly prefer authors who live locally or have other local connections. If you're running for local office, you are ideally situated. If you're submitting an op-ed in a city where you once lived or worked, be sure to mention this in your cover note and byline. Likewise, if you're writing for a publication that serves a particular profession, ethnic group or other cohort, let them know how you connect personally to their audience.

Use short sentences and paragraphs. Look at some op-eds and count the number of words per sentence. You'll probably find the sentences to be quite short. You should use the same style, relying mainly on simple declarative sentences. Cut long paragraphs into two or more shorter ones.

Avoid jargon. If a technical detail is not essential to your argument, don't use it. When in doubt, leave it out. Simple language doesn't mean simple thinking; it means you are being considerate of readers who lack your expertise and are sitting half-awake at their breakfast table or computer screen. Have someone outside of your field read a draft and make sure they can understand what you're saying.

Use the active voice. Don't write: "It is hoped that [or: One would hope that] the school board will …" Instead, say "I hope the school board …" Active voice is nearly always better than passive voice. It's easier to read and leaves no doubt about who is doing the hoping, recommending or other action.

Avoid tedious rebuttals. If you've written your article in response to an earlier piece that made your blood boil, avoid the temptation to prepare a point-by-point rebuttal. It makes you look petty. It's likely that readers didn't see the earlier article, and if they did they've probably forgotten it. Just take a deep breath, mention the earlier article once, and then argue your own case. If you really need to rebut the article, forego an op-ed and instead write a letter to the editor.

Acknowledge the other side. People writing op-eds sometimes make the mistake of piling on one reason after another about why they're right and their opponents are wrong. They would probably appear more credible, and almost certainly more humble and appealing, if they took a moment to acknowledge the ways in which their opponents are right. When you see experienced op-ed authors saying "to be sure," that's what they're doing.

Make your ending a winner. As noted, you need a strong opening paragraph or "lead" to hook readers. However, it's also important to summarize your argument in a strong final paragraph because many casual readers scan the headline, skim the opening, and then read the final paragraph and byline. You might conclude with a phrase or thought that appeared in the opening, thereby closing the circle.

Relax and have fun. While many authors approach an op-ed as an exercise in solemnity, they would improve their chances if they would lighten up, have some fun, and entertain the reader. Newspaper editors despair of weighty articles — known in the trade as "thumb suckers" — and delight in an academic writer who chooses examples from "Entertainment Tonight" as well as from eminent authorities.

Don't worry about the headline. The newspaper will write its own headline. You can suggest one, but don't spend a lot of time worrying about it.

Offer graphics. Until recently, newspaper op-ed pages rarely accepted graphics or photos to accompany op-ed submissions. This tradition is now changing, especially as publications move online. If you have a terrific illustration, photo, video or other asset that might accompany your article, alert the editor when you send it.

Submitting your op-ed

Almost all newspapers and commentary sites now post guidelines about how they prefer to receive op-ed submissions. In general, they provide an email address where you can submit the article electronically. Always be sure to include your contact information and whether you have a professional photo of yourself available.

Here's a wild guess: You're hoping to publish your article in *The New York Times* with *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* as backups. Well, welcome to the club. These and other national publications such as *USA Today* receive a staggering number of submissions, the overwhelming majority of which are rejected. You have a better shot at regional newspapers and, especially, at papers serving your own community. Websites such as Slate and The Huffington Post are also gaining in importance. Regardless of where you send it, you'll probably fare best with arguments that are provocative, humorous, personal or unexpected.

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