

Writing an Impactful Op-Ed

Writing an op-ed for your local, state, or national newspaper is an effective way to reach numerous readers, be persuasive, help steer a public debate, and consequently influence policy decisions. Effective op-ed articles can also increase community interest in both the author and the organization(s) they may be representing.

Unlike a letter-to-the-editor, op-eds present writers with the opportunity to expound on a specific issue or piece of legislation in greater detail and are commonly considerably longer than the average LTE.

HELPFUL TIPS

- **Be timely**—Timing is critical when writing an op-ed. Readers want articles that pertain to current events. Whenever possible, try to tie your article to a pending piece of legislation or current event in the news or up for consideration at the Capitol.
- **Be concise**—Aim for roughly 750 words if not shorter. Newspapers have limited space to offer and outlining your arguments clearly and succinctly is key to reaching a wide audience.
- **Focus on a single issue**— Make one argument thoroughly, point-by-point. It's better to speak to a single subject in a detailed fashion than cover multiple issues broadly.
- **Open strong with your main point**— A strong opening line is key to hooking a reader and convincing them that your article is worth the read.
- **Explain why readers should care the issue at hand**— Put yourself in the shoes of the reader. Speak to how the issue you're addressing will impact them and explain why.
- **Offer solutions/recommendations**— An op-ed is not meant to solely describe an issue but to offer your opinion about how best to improve it and back up your inferences with sound facts and research.
- **Show, don't tell**— Simply outlining the components of a piece of legislation or issue isn't always enough to move the reader to take action. Providing specific examples about the benefits or adverse impacts of specific policy are key to making your op-ed memorable.
- **Use short sentences and paragraphs**—Typical op-ed articles utilize short sentences and paragraphs. Consider cutting down lengthy paragraphs into a couple of shorter ones when possible to make your article as readable as possible.
- **Feel free to use the personal voice**— If you're writing as an individual, it's good to use the personal voice whenever possible, especially if you have a background or expertise in the subject area at hand.
- **Don't assume that your audience will know what you're writing about**— If you are covering pending legislation, explain what the bill is, what its impacts will be, and include a timeline for when it will be decided on. If you're writing in response to another article or editorial, start your letter by addressing which article you're responding to and when it was published.

- **Avoid jargon**— When in doubt, leave it out. If a technical detail isn't essential to making your argument then don't use it. Simple language doesn't impact your credibility, but instead makes your article more readable to audiences who may lack your expertise and knowledge of the topic.
- **Acknowledge the opposition's position**— Many op-eds make the mistake of focusing solely on why their opinions are right and others are wrong. Addressing, and in some cases validating, the views of your opponents can make an article more appealing and credible to a wider audience instead of "preaching to the choir."
- **Finish strong**— While your introduction is crucial to hooking the reader, it's also important to summate your argument in a strong final paragraph. The more casual reader will read the opening paragraph, skim the body, then read the conclusion, so make it count. A common trick is to conclude with an idea or phrase used during the opening paragraph, thereby closing the article.
- **Offer visuals**— If you have photo, illustration, video, or other helpful visual aid you'd like to accompany your article, let the editor know upon submission.
- **How to submit an op-ed**— Most newspapers and other publications provide guidelines on how to submit an article and generally include an e-mail address you can send it to. When doing so, make sure to include your contact info, the organization you represent (if applicable), and mention if you have a photo of yourself available.

HOW TO STRUCTURE YOUR OP-ED

- **Introduction**—Your opening paragraph is what sets the scene and grabs your reader's attention. Mention of a specific issue or legislation currently in the news is a common hook. Conclude your introductory paragraph with a thesis or position statement that clarifies your argument.
- **Supporting paragraphs**— Include three supporting paragraphs backed up by credible statistics, news, reports, firsthand experiences, and other evidence.
- **Conclusion**— Summarize your arguments and offer a call to action or urge a proposed solution to the problem at hand.