

Center for American Progress



Op-Ed Articles: How to Write Them

Op-ed articles are a great way to reshape a public debate and affect policy. Here are some helpful tips for writing a successful op-ed. Send us your drafts for guidance, or after they are published at workingfamilies@americanprogress.org!

Track the news cycle. Timing is essential. When an issue is dominating the news, 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. Keep in mind that it generally takes a few days to receive an answer from a publication.

Read the opinion pages. Being a regular consumer of the opinion pages – both for national and local papers – will help you get a sense what editorial page editors are looking for in an op-ed. Also, it will enable you to be strategic about where to pitch your piece. For example, you'll want to avoid a publication if they recently ran an op-ed similar to what you're writing.

Limit the article to 750 words. Shorter is even better. Some authors insist they need more room to explain their argument. Unfortunately, newspapers have limited space to offer, and editors generally won't take the time to cut a long article down to size.

Make a single point - well. You cannot solve all of the world's problems in 750 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. Explain how your suggestions might affect the readers. Appeals to self-interest usually are more effective than abstract punditry.

Consider the audience. If you're trying for a regional outlet, include local data and examples where appropriate, especially if you don't have a personal connection to the area. Calculate how many jobs project X would mean for the region or highlight the work of a local group as something that should be modeled elsewhere.

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. In an op-ed article you need to offer recommendations. How exactly should North Carolina safeguard its environment or the White House change its foreign policy? You'll need to do more than call for "more research!" or suggest that opposing parties work out their differences.

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 article, look for great examples that will bring your argument to life.

Use short sentences and paragraphs. Look at some op-ed articles 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. Use nutrition assistance instead of SNAP. Write out acronyms such as the Affordable Care Act instead of the ACA or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development instead of OECD.

Use the active voice. Instead of: "It is hoped that [or: One would hope that] the government will . . ." say "I hope the government will . . ." Active voice is almost always better than passive voice. It's easier to read, and it 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 reads petty. It's likely that readers didn't see the earlier article and, if they did, they've probably forgotten it. So, just take a deep breath, mention the earlier article once and argue your own case.

Make your ending a winner. You're probably familiar with the importance of a strong opening paragraph, or "lead," that hooks readers. But when writing for the op-ed page, it's also important to summarize your argument in a strong final paragraph. That's because many casual readers scan the headline, skim the opening column and then read only the final paragraph and byline. In fact, one trick many columnists use is to conclude with a phrase or thought that they used in the opening, thereby closing the circle.

How to submit an article. Most outlets will want an op-ed exclusively. It's important to follow op-ed guidelines for submission and only submit to one publication at a time.

Where to submit the article. 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 *Newsweek* and *USA Today*, receive a staggering number of submissions, the overwhelming majority of which are rejected. Think about what audience you REALLY want to reach with your argument, and whether using a more targeted or local approach might work. Also, consider online publications and blogs, which are gaining in importance and readership.

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Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor

If you want to write a piece that will add to the debate and get published, see if it meets the OPTIC criteria!

Original – Are you writing something that’s fresh and different? Find a new way to make an argument, offer new research and make sure you are writing original content and not just quoting from what’s already out there.

Personal – Why are *you* the right person to provide this point of view? Don’t be afraid to offer personal insights and stories.

Timely – Why now? Finding a good news hook is often the key to getting a piece published. Think about why this piece is relevant now and see if you can work a current event into your piece.

Informative – Did the reader learn something? Make sure the reader comes away from your piece knowing more than they did before. Op-eds aren’t just a chance to rant or rave on an issue; they should enrich the reader’s knowledge.

Controversial/Counterintuitive – Are people arguing about this issue? Is my take on this unexpected? Writing about a hot issue, arguing an unexpected point of view, or co-authoring a piece with someone who the reader might not expect will help your piece stand out.

Getting Published

- **Find the right outlet** – Consider whether your writing is meant for local, regional or national consumption. Most newspapers have submission guidelines for op-eds and letters online in the “opinion” section of their website. Also consider local websites and alternative papers.
- **Follow submission rules** – Most newspapers will want an op-ed exclusively. Be careful to read the guidelines for submission and only submit to one place at a time if they require exclusivity.
- **Follow-up** – Give the paper a few days to consider your submission and feel free to follow-up for a firm yes or no.
- **Make edits** – If a paper accepts your writing, they will want to edit it and you should be accepting of most changes. If you’ve been working to place a piece for a while, edit and update it as you go.