



Writing Op Ed Pieces

“Op Ed” essays appear in the section of a newspaper/news magazine that contains its editorials (which reflect the position of the paper/magazine itself), letters to the editor, regular columns and other opinion pieces. Prominently placed, op ed essays typically deliver a compelling perspective on a topic of broad public interest.

The op-ed pieces most likely to get published come from authors with strong credentials and personal or professional experience that qualify them to speak to the topic at hand

Many people think of op-eds as expressing strong, one-sided opinions. Often they do. But an op-ed essay might also give voice to the voiceless, illuminate sides of an issue that reporters have missed, or help readers understand multiple perspectives on a topic. Some of the best op-eds simply deliver a strong series of facts intended to elevate the level of public understanding of a hot topic.

Consider writing an op-ed

- When you have more to say than a letter to the editor allows
- When you want to mobilize community energy and attract resources to an issue of broad public concern
- When you believe elected officials, civic bodies or public employees have misunderstood or misrepresented an issue, misused public funds or engaged in unethical acts.

Tips on writing a good piece that gets published:

- Focus on a single theme with three or four points supporting it.
- Use humor when appropriate, but avoid sarcasm. Biting sarcasm often hurts people and may diminish support for your issue.
- If you plan to criticize, take the high road: criticize ideas, not people. Avoid any references that present another person in a negative light; these might constitute libel, defamation of character, or malicious slander.
- Don’t allow your passion for your topic to exaggerate and don’t state facts you can’t support. Speak simply, from the heart. Use strong, compelling facts. Aim to elevate the level of public understanding rather than tear down the arguments of those you disagree with.
- Tell a story. “Speak out” your message onto paper. Focus on the concrete, human impacts of your issue. Note how it affects on real people—their environment, their family life, their health, their quality of life. If you can find a strong quote, use it. Readers respond to a real human voice.
- Don’t worry about “unbiased objectivity.” Every time a writer puts words to paper, those words reflect a subjective bias. Instead, seek balance and inclusiveness. Show that you’ve examined points of view other than your own and looked at the issue’s many dimensions.

- Use active verbs. Say, *Smith delivered the report in May*, instead of, *The report was delivered in May*. Avoid overusing forms of the verb *to be*: am, are, was, were, be, been, being. These verb constructions rob your prose of power, may cause confusion and can deliver meanings you don't intend.
- Cut every word that doesn't perform important work. Use strong nouns and strong verbs instead of cluttering your piece with adjectives and adverbs.
- Cut out all jargon, acronyms you don't write out in full the first time you use them, and any big words people don't use in everyday speech. The words, expressions and rhythms of everyday speech will express your ideas more effectively and present you more authoritatively than high-falutin' prose intended to impress.
- Expressing yourself clearly and simply does not equate with "dumbing down." No editor ever turned down a piece of written work because she found it "much too comprehensible" or "too easily understood."

A few more tips:

- Try not to send your op-ed piece "cold." Instead, if you know someone who works at the newspaper or magazine, call him or her, explain what you have in mind and ask for advice on getting published.
- Accompany your op-ed piece with a well-written cover letter, two or three paragraphs that explain a little about the experience or credentials that qualify you to write this piece, along with a sentence or two about why it matters to the paper's readers.
- Don't represent yourself as speaking for a group unless the group has given you explicit permission to serve as a spokesperson. Even then, run your finished piece by a couple of members of the group you represent before you mail or email it to editors.