



## Writing and Submitting an Opinion Piece: A Guide

### Why write an opinion piece?

The opinion pages are among the best-read sections of any publication—often on par with the front page itself. In addition to the general public, some of the most attentive readers of these pages are decision makers in government, corporations, and nonprofit institutions. The opinion pages are one of the best ways to place an issue in the public eye, or to bring another perspective to the news.

### Print vs. electronic

The writing guidelines are the same in any medium. Consider writing for all mediums including traditional print such as newspapers and magazines as well as electronic which includes blogs, extended web editions of newspapers, and purely web-based news/opinion operations such as the Huffington Post, Political.com and Slate.com.

### What makes a good opinion piece?

Editors of news publications seek submissions that, in addition to displaying expertise, are also well written, timely and provocative—all the hallmarks of any good nonfiction writing. A good op-ed is concise, hits hard and evokes vivid images, analogies and arguments. It is informed and backed by facts—not just emotion or opinion. Most editors see the opinion page as a section for advocacy, denunciations, controversy and astonishment. In general, publications want opinion pages to stimulate community discussion and drive public debate.

### Credentials

Before sitting down to write, consider whether you are you the right person to write/sign the op-ed. Passion and strong opinion are prerequisites; but they are not enough. Your credibility is far higher if you have true expertise, either through your training and work, or through a telling and powerful personal experience. You must be able to back up all points made.

### Timing

If the issue or a related subject has been in the news lately, or if you are responding to a particular article, then the background of your piece will be well laid out, and it will increase your chances of getting in. However, in some cases, something may be going on below the public radar that should be in the news pages, but has not yet reached them. So, sometimes an op-ed helps to break the news itself. Occasionally if your op-ed does not break new ground, you may be able to find something current to tie it to: a holiday, anniversary, election, upcoming conference, report, a vote in Congress, or pending action by local or state government.

### Which publication to target for your op-ed?

Consider your readers/audience before you do anything. Are you submitting to a national, general-interest publication? If not, narrow your scope to something that pertains to the readership of that publication. Editors of local and regional papers also look for community interest or a strong local angle, and unless there is considerable public debate already, will be less receptive to op-eds about national issues or broad

ideas. In this case, you can try telling a local story, usually about a real person, family or group and how your issue affects them.

### **Writing the piece**

An op-ed is generally 500-750 words and it must unfold quickly. Focus on one issue or idea, briefly express your opinion in your opening paragraph, and be clear and confirmed in your viewpoint. The following paragraphs should back your viewpoint with factual, researched, or first-hand information. A good op-ed is not just an opinion; it consists of fact put into well-informed context.

Be timely and controversial--but not outrageous. Personal, conversational, and humorous (when appropriate) writing is important to readability, and to capturing the reader's attention. Make sure that you educate without preaching. Near the end, clearly restate your position and issue a call to action. If you are discussing a problem, then offer a solution or a better approach; this takes the reader beyond mere criticism.

Try to include a catchy title for your op-ed that emphasizes your central message. This will help the editor grasp the idea quickly, and help sell the piece. Be prepared, however, for the publication to write its own headline as an author's headline is rarely used no matter how good it is.

Below are some specifics keep in mind as you write:

- Come down hard on one side of the argument, and never equivocate.
- Identify the counterargument, and refute it with facts.
- Emphasize active verbs; go easy on adjectives and adverbs.
- Avoid clichés.
- Avoid technical jargon and acronyms.
- Try to grab the reader's attention in the first line. End with a strong or thought-provoking line.
- Use specific references and easy-to-understand data rather than abstraction.
- Anecdotes can sometimes help enhance understanding of an issue.
- Ideally, your topic will be timely, but at the same time have a long shelf life (i.e., the problem won't be solved in a month).

### **How to Submit**

Op-eds should almost always be submitted by email (check the op-ed submission guidelines for each publication you target to ensure that you follow their rules). Most likely your submission will include a brief bio, phone number, email address, and mailing address. You may also consider including a succinct cover letter to establish why you are qualified to write the piece that briefly explains why the issue is important and why readers would care.

In general, you should submit to only one publication at a time. Sometimes editors can take up to 10 days to accept or reject. If your piece is very timely, it may be acceptable to submit to several outlets at once, but you must check submission guidelines and inform each editor of the multiple submissions (*The New York Times* will only consider pieces sent to them exclusively). Avoid submitting the same op-ed to two papers in the same geographical or readership market. Quite often, you will not be notified if your op-

ed is rejected (the official *New York Times* policy is that you should consider yourself rejected if you don't hear within three business days).

If your op-ed does not get accepted, but still concerns a topic of current concern and has been recently covered, you might consider shortening it and resubmitting as a letter to the editor. You will get less space—but you will still have a chance of getting published.