

TIPSHEET

Writing a slam-dunk op-ed

An op-ed – shorthand for “opposite the editorial page” – is a column written by someone not on the news staff of that paper and is typically a response to a news event or policy introduction. Anyone from your neighbor Joan, your Congressperson, or a passionate fisherman 300 miles away who serves your city’s seafood restaurants can write op-eds. As long as you have an opinion and can clearly lay out your argument, weave in your personal story, sprinkle it with facts and other evidence, and present it in the format editors prefer, you are on your way to at least five minutes of fame and fortune.

First things first: have a clear goal in mind. Op-eds take time to write. What is your message? Who is it aimed at? Who can best reach the intended audience? It may be the case that you are not the most persuasive voice on this issue with that decision maker. Perhaps the best use of your time is finding a farmer, a nurse or another person with a stake in the issue to be the voice and author of the op-ed.

Once you have nailed down your goal, message and author, what is the secret sauce for op-eds that rise to the top of the submissions pile that editors receive on a daily basis?

FOUR FILTERS FOR VETTING YOUR OP-ED IDEA

1. **Newsworthiness:** Is the topic in the news, and are you offering a new take on the issue?
2. **Timing:** Is your take on the issue relevant to the current debate?
3. **Local relevance:** The editor will ask, “Why should my readers care?” Cite local examples and impacts.
4. **Author:** Is the author of the op-ed trusted, credible and logically connected to the issue?

FOUR STEPS FOR WRITING AN OP-ED

Step 1: The open

The open is where the author establishes their relationship to the issue they are about to discuss. Their background, a personal experience that drew them to speak out, or a surprise moment – all of these are good to draw the readers in to read the op-ed in its entirety.

Step 2: The threat

It is important for readers to understand the impacts or consequences associated with an issue.

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Maybe it is water or air quality; maybe it is an economic consequence. State the threat or problem that could occur if the right action is not taken. Describe it in values-based terms, like health, safety or quality of life, and that will clue the readers in as to how it will impact their daily lives. This is a good place to balance facts and statistics with personal stories.

Step 3: The solution

The solution is what will eliminate the threat. It should be simple to understand and not too technical, and describe how it will improve lives, the economy, public health, or whatever the outcome might be. A personal story that upends conventional thinking could be tremendously powerful here.

Step 4: The ask

Close the op-ed with a strong statement of your ask, and include a call to action if appropriate. Examples of this are: join me, tell your leaders, vote for such and such, etc. If you mention a Congressman or state legislator's name in the op-ed, you can be sure they will pay attention because their legislative aides scour media coverage for mentions of their boss.

SUBMITTING YOUR OP-ED

When the op-ed is polished and ready to submit, write a short pitch – no more than a paragraph or two – to accompany it. Emphasize why the op-ed is timely and of interest to the newspaper or online site's readership, and the author's connection to the issue.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

- Make sure the outlet has not published a similar op-ed with a similar viewpoint recently – nothing is worse than making them think you do not follow their coverage.
- Check the word limit before you begin writing – if you write 1,000 words and their maximum is 600, you have wasted a ton of time.
- Respect the typical editor's desire to publish original content – do not submit your op-ed simultaneously to multiple outlets.