

Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor

An opinion-editorial is a 600-800 word essay that makes a clear, convincing argument about a relevant current event or issue, offering a unique perspective not found in the mainstream news coverage.

Selecting a potential op-ed topic

Make it current: newspapers look to guest op-eds for a unique perspective on current events – i.e. that week. Discussions of broad cultural trends are left to regular columnists.

Bring a unique perspective: what side of the story is the media not telling? Try to shed new light on a topic that's receiving a lot of attention in the news. Don't be afraid to have strong opinions.

Plan ahead: if you know a relevant event (e.g. a Supreme Court decision, or legislative vote) is on the horizon that you think would be appropriate, flag it as early as possible and begin drafting.

Be strategic about timing: most papers won't publish an op-ed from the same organization more than once every 6 months, so think carefully about which stories you want to pitch where, and when.

Think local: getting into a national, top-tier paper is not only extremely unlikely (e.g. NYT only takes ~15% of their op-eds from public submissions), but it may be less effective. If the story has a local or state angle, the chances of it getting printed and getting read by the right people are much higher at the local level.

Planning content

Consider making it personal: If you or someone else in the organization has a personal experience or tie to the issue at hand, use it. These can make for compelling, first-hand arguments.

Be ready to move quickly: Time is of the essence with op-eds, so the drafting, review, revision, and approval process has to operate within a short timeframe. If there are several people in your organization who must sign off before submission, let them know a draft is coming soon.

Composing a successful op-ed

Introduction

Engaging lead: the first line(s) should capture the reader's attention and introduce the topic.

Clear argument: an op-ed hangs on one central argument/thesis, so put this forth early on.

Overall tone: be succinct, avoid jargon, and write in a conversational style.

Body

Support your opinion: illustrate this thesis with approximately three supporting points or insights, and support these insights with hard evidence (data, research, recent events, local examples, etc).

Address the counterpoint: use one paragraph to briefly address criticisms or counterpoints.

Conclusion

End with a strong CTA: each op-ed should end with a call-to-action (CTA), pointing to what needs to happen now (court case overturned, legislation passed, etc). Statements of general support or outrage will lack the specific and actionable point of view papers are looking for.

Alternatives to an op-ed

Letter to the editor: a 250-400 word essay that responds directly to an article published in a given newspaper that week. They can be much easier to place than op-eds, and given their length, can be a lighter lift to turn around quickly. Ideally they should be submitted within 24 to 48 hours.

Blogs: know the important blogs in your field and their guidelines for submission. Be ready to draft and submit quickly.