

How to write an Opinion Piece (Op/Ed):

RESOURCES FROM the "OP-ED PROJECT"

<http://www.theopedproject.org/>

The OpEd Project is an initiative to expand the range of voices we hear from in the world. These forums are a gateway into public debate, feed all other media, and drive thought leadership in America and beyond. Since women currently do not submit op-eds with anywhere near the frequency that men do, we target and train women experts in all fields to write for the op-ed pages of major print and online forums of public discourse. Our mission is to bring about a sea change in our national conversation, which is currently overwhelmingly dominated (85%) by men.

Questions for Op-Ed Writers

1. **Why should we readers trust you?** Are you authoritative on your topic? Are you accountable to what you say you know? Can you provide evidence of your expertise? You don't need to have a famous name, a big title, or a fancy degree – but you do need to be well positioned to speak on your topic, and able to convey it.
2. **Can you back up what you say?** Is your argument based on evidence – solid material and logical building blocks that will be acknowledged as credible even by those who may disagree with your interpretation?
3. **What's new?** Is your argument different, particularly original in the way it is delivered, or is it backed up by substantially new information or reporting? What is compelling about its contribution to the conversation?
4. **So what?** Why should everyone else – including those of us who are not experts in your area – care?
5. **What's the difference between being "right" and being "effective"?** Does your language tend to write off the people who would disagree with you, or do you employ empathy and respect in the pursuit of changing minds?
6. **How will your ideas and arguments contribute to the conversation, and be helpful to your audience?** Do you see your knowledge and experience in terms of its potential value to others?

Tips for Op-Ed Writing

1. **Own your expertise** Know what you are an expert in and why - but don't limit yourself. Consider the metaphors that your experience and knowledge suggest.
2. **Stay current** Follow the news – both general and specific to your areas of specialty. If you write about Haiti, read the Haitian press. If you write about pop culture, read the media that cover it.

3. **The perfect is the enemy of the good** In other words: write fast. You may have only a few hours to get your piece in before the moment is gone. But also...

4. **Cultivate a flexible mind** Remember that a good idea may have more than one news hook, indeed if the idea is important enough it can have many. So keep an eye out for surprising connections and new news hooks – the opportunity may come around again.

5. **Use plain language** Jargon serves a purpose, but it is rarely useful in public debate, and can obfuscate – sorry, I mean cloud – your argument. Speak to your reader in straight talk.

6. **Respect your reader** Never underestimate your reader’s intelligence, or overestimate her level of information. Recognize that your average reader is not an expert in your topic, and that the onus is on you to capture her attention – and make the argument compel.

Basic Op-Ed Structure

(THIS IS NOT A RULE! – JUST ONE WAY OF APPROACHING IT.)

Lede (Around a news hook)

Thesis (Statement of argument – either explicit or implied)

Argument: Based on evidence (such as stats, news, reports from credible organizations, expert quotes, scholarship, history, first-hand experience)

1st Point
evidence
evidence
conclusion

2nd Point
evidence
evidence
conclusion

3rd Point
evidence
evidence
conclusion

Note: In a simple, declarative op-ed (“policy X is bad; here’s why”), this may be straightforward. In a more complex commentary, the 3rd point may expand on the bigger picture—historical context, global/geographic picture, mythological underpinnings, etc.—or may offer an explanation for a mystery that underpins the argument— eg., why a bad policy continues, in spite of its failures.

“To Be Sure” paragraph (in which you pre-empt your potential critics by acknowledging any flaws in your argument, and address any obvious counter-arguments.)

Conclusion (often circling back to your lede)

Ledes and News Hooks

A lede is what sets the scene and grabs your reader's attention – it is your introduction. A news hook is what makes your piece timely, and often is part of the lede. Be bold, but incontrovertible. Tell an anecdote, if it illustrates your point. Use humor, if appropriate. Use clean sentences. A few possibilities (from real op-eds):

Use the News

This Wednesday evening Frances Newton, 40, will be put to death for the murders of her husband and two children 18 years ago...

Tell a dramatic anecdote

Ten years ago, I asked Bosnian civilians under siege in Sarjevo where they would go if they could escape...

Reference popular culture

The marketing campaign shows real women, rather than anorectic teenagers, in white bras and panties posing next to the slogan "New Dove Firming. As tested on real curves"...

Turn conventional wisdom on end

Sex and the City's main characters are witty, glamorous, independent and sexually liberated – in short, who wouldn't want to be them? Me, for one.

Use wit and irony to point out a contradiction

So now we know what "noble cause" Cindy Sheehan's son died for in Iraq: Sharia. It's a good thing W stands for women, or I'd be worried.

Use an anniversary

Fifty years after the Supreme Court banned school segregation, the battle over the racial composition of America's schools continues in courtrooms across the country.

Cite a major new study

According to a new nation-wide poll, 60% of women have cheated on their husbands at least once.

Get Personal

College admissions officers around the country will be reading my applications this month, essays in which I describe personal aspirations, academic goals -- even, in one case, a budding passion for the sitar. What they won't know is that I actually graduated from college more than a year ago, and that the names attached to these essays are those of my duplicitous clients.

How to Pitch

How do you get someone to listen to you in the first place? How do you establish credibility, capture interest, and convey the immediate relevance of your point of view – quickly and decisively?

Pitching can happen in lots of ways, but very often it is done by email.

An effective email pitch answers these basic questions:

Why now? What's the news hook? Why is this worth reading at this moment?

So what? Why should people care?

Why me? Why am I the best one to write this piece?

A pitch should also include:

- Your idea in a few lines
- Your credentials – only those that are relevant
- The finished piece pasted below your pitch
- Your contact information

Aspects of a successful pitch:

- Timely
- Well written
- Brief and clear
- Conveys expertise
- Unexpected point of view

Follow Up: If the editor responds:

Thank your editor. Even if they said “no.” Remember that “no” can be the beginning of a conversation that can eventually lead to “yes.”

If they published you, thank them not for showcasing you but for giving space to the ideas and issues.

Follow Up: If there is no response:

Have a time limit. If your idea has a very short shelf life, you might give an editor a day or less to respond; if it's evergreen, a week or two or more. Then send a follow-up email to the editor saying that you'd still like to run your piece in their publication, but since the piece is timely, if you don't hear from them by the end of the day (week, whatever) you will assume they have passed, and you'll be submitting your op-ed elsewhere.

Note: Most national newspapers will not consider your piece if you submit to more than one paper at the same time.