

Writing Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor

Op-Eds and letters to the Editor are short articles in a newspaper's Editorial Section. Letters are usually about 250 words or less; Op-Eds about 800 words. Letters generally respond to a previous article in the paper. Op-Ed stands for either opposite the editorial page, or opinions & editorials (depending on which source you believe).

Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor can be very useful tools for advocates to get your message out.

- Most policymakers read these religiously; it is an important way for elected officials to track issues important to their constituents.
- It is a cheap (free) way to address public opinion. You can explain why mental illness is not a flaw of character or how we all pay for care for the uninsured.
- They are your words, your message. No misquoting, no chance that the reporter will miss your point (or come to his own). And your opponents have to write their own article to get a response in.
- It is an excellent way to explain a complex issue.
- You can make connections in policy that are more difficult in hallway conversations. For example, the connection between reductions in spending on health care for children and resulting productivity losses by employers of parents.
- If your issue is not getting press, or is now "old news", an article can revive the issue.
- While it is difficult to get published in the Courant (they get over 300 letters each day), smaller papers are often hungry for articles.
- You can give your article to a policymaker to submit in their name. (A little secret, and it is between you and your conscience if this is OK with you). You get to put words in policymakers' mouths (it doesn't get better than that) and visibility. And they get publicity on an important issue. If you do this, keep it between you and the policymaker.

How to write an Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor:

- Plan your message. Choose just one. Don't try to pack too much in. If you have a different take or a unique perspective on an issue, it is more likely to be published.
- Choose your target. If you are trying to move public opinion, look for the paper with the largest circulation. If you want to reach a particular legislator, choose his hometown paper or one you know that he reads.
- Read the paper(s). Find out what kind of issues and writing styles are likely to be published.
- Contact the paper and find out their policies. You want to know about:
 - How to submit
 - Timing - when you can submit and how long it will likely take to be published
 - Length limitations
 - Do they only take exclusive submissions
 - Any other rules - For example, do they allow you to use pseudonyms for people in the story, do they allow more than one person to sign.
- Start writing.
 - Keep it as short as possible. When they say 750 words, they mean it. The most common reason that articles are not published is because they are too long.

- Be clear. Big words and lots of statistics do not score more points, they just lose the reader.
- Be direct. Don't use sarcasm or hypothetical questions. Don't make them guess what your point is.
- Real life stories engage readers and can often make a point in far fewer words than a page of statistics.
- Choose words carefully. Do not offend. No personal attacks. Do nothing that detracts the reader from your point.
- Use humor, as long as it is appropriate.
- Explain your stake in the issue up front. If you are a health care provider arguing for higher rates or a person with disabilities arguing against cuts in services, say so.
- It can be effective if you bring up your opponents' case and prove it wrong. If you can't, don't include it.
- Offer readers action steps, if possible.
- Include your name, address, a phone number where you can be reached, any organizational affiliation, and a one-sentence description of that organization. You definitely do not have to be writing on behalf of an organization to get published.
- Triple check your facts.
- Ask a friend to read it over to check for errors and to be sure it is understandable and engaging.
- Next, send it to the paper(s) the way they asked to get it.
- Check to be sure that they got it - that the right person got it. If there is a timing issue to publication, e.g. an upcoming vote, let them know.
- Call back in a few days if you haven't heard anything. You may have to call back a few times before you get an answer. Be persistent.
- They may want you to make some changes or they may make the changes and send it to you for approval. Don't take it personally - that's what editors do. And they are usually right.
- Do not get discouraged if they don't print your article. Find out as much as you can about why. Consider sending it to another paper.
- If you do get published, save the clipping. Send it to policymakers in case they didn't see it.

Carolyn Lumsden, an editor at the Hartford Courant sent this as their guidance for potential Op-Ed authors.

OP-ED GUIDELINES

Those who wish to write for the Other Opinion page should preferably have expertise or personal experience with the subject they are writing about. It's best to take sides in a debate about a public issue. We do not publish poetry or anonymous or pseudonymous articles.

Here are guidelines for writing for the page:

1. Get right into the subject. Make your position clear from the beginning.
2. Keep your sentences short, and don't try to make too many arguments in one article.
3. Be sure that all names are correct and all quotations are accurate.

4. Be sure to end your article with a forceful conclusion.