

Tips for Writing an Op-Ed

What Is An Op-Ed?

- An Op-Ed is a newspaper column written to persuade readers on an issue, often on a contentious issue.
- It is an expression of opinion, based on facts or first-hand information that marshals evidence in an engaging style.

How Do You Begin?

- Choose one issue with one viewpoint and avoid unnecessary detours.
- An Op-Ed is not an essay that unfolds to some conclusion. It is the opposite.
- State your conclusion first, then back up your case with facts.
- To begin, write your argument in a headline format. If you cannot phrase your main point in six or eight words, you probably need to do more thinking.
- Consider using short lists to help support your major points—“These are three essential facts that prove my point.”
- Choose a topic that interests you; if you want to tackle a national or international issue, try to bring in a local connection especially for a school or community newspaper.

The Structure

- The Lead (the “hook”)
 - 1-2 paragraphs
- The Position Statement/Theme
 - 1-2 sentence statement of your position
- The Opposing View (optional)
 - Briefly state the opposing argument but...
 - Move quickly to your argument with details.
- Supporting Details
 - Three arguments, one paragraph each, backed up by facts, statistics or authoritative quotes.
- The Conclusion
 - Try to restate without directly repeating your position, reminding your reader of the opening hook in some way.
 - Suggest a course of action or remedy.

How To Be Persuasive

- Make your argument understandable to a general audience, not just to experts.
- Use active rather than passive verbs. Avoid clichés and over-use of adjectives and adverbs; emphasize precise nouns and verbs.
- Keep it as short as possible. Op-Eds are usually 600 to 750 words.
- Do not just criticize; make a constructive suggestion as well.

- Avoid ranting and profane language. Take a professional tone.
- Use humor where appropriate but sarcasm rarely works; avoid it.
- Connect your argument to personal experience—“As high school students, we learned that hate indoctrination has no place in an educational setting.”
- Do *not* write in the “first person,” except to make a point from direct personal experience.

Strong Leads

- Engage readers with a provocative question, a personal anecdote, a concrete image or a relevant example, then state your thesis clearly.
- A strong lead includes a “hook”—“One site tourists in Washington won't be able to visit this summer is the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Thank goodness!”
- Limit your opening to a short paragraph or two.
- Do not hesitate to spend considerable time on the lead since it sets the direction and tone of the piece.
- Leads fall into four categories:
 1. Summation lead: Begin with a summary of the main facts on which the Op-Ed is built.
 2. Quotation lead: Start with a striking quotation that sets the stage for your argument.
 3. Question lead: Ask a leading question, and then answer it.
 4. Anecdotal lead: Begin with a story, even a personal one.

Making Your Argument

- Boil your argument down to at most three major points, using tightly written paragraphs that contain no more than three declarative sentences.
- Every argument you make should contribute to your view on the issue.
- Cite facts to support your position. Make sure they are timely, accurate and verifiable.
- Keep good records in case an editor or reader questions you and you need to verify your sources.
- Identify sources for statistics when using them—“Data from the 2000 Census clearly show that...”
- Do *not* include every fact at your disposal to strengthen your argument. Choose the most central or startling evidence or most compelling quote.

Including Opposing Arguments

- If possible, anticipate and *briefly* refute the most likely objection to your argument.
- If you can readily prove your opponent’s case is wrong, bring it up *briefly*. If you cannot, *do not* include it.
- If you refute an opposing argument, be sure to use more space arguing your point than writing about the other side’s view.
- If you touch on the opposing argument, deal with it respectfully and non-dismissively.

The Conclusion

- Columns that end with a thoughtful final point or a hard-hitting summary have a better chance of getting published.
- Make your last paragraph an emphatic conclusion connecting to the opening premise
- Editors are looking for creative solutions to a problem. Offer a new idea or remedy.
- Keep it short and never introduce new information. A new idea is fine as part of a logical progression, but never a new fact.

Now Edit!

- Check all spelling, especially of proper names. Check punctuation.
- *Read* and *re-read* your column. Are your arguments connected clearly from one to the next?
- Have a friend read your draft for clarity and grammar.

Getting Published

- E-mail your column to the opinion or commentary editor of the newspaper; find the address information on the Op-Ed page or publication's Web site under "How To Contact Us" or "Staff."
- If sending by mail, type the piece double-spaced.
- Include your name, address, day and evening phone numbers and email address. Some suggest including a one-line bio in a cover letter, for example, "Jonny Jacobs is editor of the Central High School *Weekly Paper*."
- Check the newspaper's guidelines. Some will only print an Op-Ed if it hasn't been sent simultaneously to another paper, or if it is not already under consideration by another paper.
- If your Op-Ed is submitted around the anniversary of a significant event, contact the opinion editor ten days to two weeks in advance and tell her, "Next Thursday is the anniversary of 'X'. Would you like a commentary making the case (i.e., your argument) about it?" Then send in your piece a day later.
- The day after you submit an article, contact the opinion editor to see if s/he received it.
- If one media outlet rejects your submission, try others. But do not expect to get published every time you submit. Do not give up! Newspapers and other outlets receive far more unsolicited commentaries than they can use. Unpublished Op-Eds help hone your skills so that eventually you will be printed.