

How to Write an Op-Ed Article

Guidelines from Duke University's Office of News and Communications

Do you have an interesting opinion to share? If you can express it clearly and persuasively in an op-ed article, you may reach millions of people, sway hearts, change minds and perhaps even reshape public policy. In the process, you may also earn recognition for yourself and your institution, all for less effort than it takes to write a professional journal article.

Duke University's Office of News and Communications (ONC) has [a strong record of placing op-ed articles](#) in many of the nation's leading news outlets. It has developed these guidelines to help you write an article that newspapers, websites or others may accept for publication. [ONC also offers a number of services](#) to help faculty members, students and other members of the Duke community write and place their articles.

Here are the guidelines:

Track the news and jump at opportunities. Timing is essential. When an issue is dominating the news — whether it's a war, a stock market panic or just the latest controversy on a reality TV show — that's what readers want to read and op-ed editors want to publish. Whenever possible, link your issue explicitly to something happening in the news. If you're a researcher studying cancer, for instance, start off by discussing the celebrity who died yesterday. Or, look ahead to a holiday or anniversary a week from now that will provide a fresh news peg (and enable editors to plan the story in advance).

Limit the article to 750 words. Shorter is even better. Some academic authors insist they need more room to explain their argument. Unfortunately, newspapers have limited space to offer, and editors generally won't take the time to cut a long article down to size.

Make a single point — well. You cannot solve all of the world's problems in 750 words. Be satisfied with making a single point clearly and persuasively. If you cannot explain your message in a sentence or two, you're trying to cover too much.

Put your main point on top. You're not writing for *Science*, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* or other academic publications that typically wait until the final paragraphs to reveal their punchlines. Op-ed articles do the opposite. You have no more than 10 seconds to hook a busy reader, which means you shouldn't "clear your throat" with a witticism or historical aside. Just get to the point and convince the reader that it's worth his or her valuable time to continue.

Tell readers why they should care. Put yourself in the place of the busy person looking at your article. At the end of every few paragraphs, ask out loud: "So what? Who cares?" You need to answer these questions. Will your suggestions help reduce readers' taxes? Protect them from disease? Make their children happier? Explain why. Appeals to self-interest usually are more effective than abstract punditry.

Offer specific recommendations. An op-ed is not a news story that simply describes a situation; it is your opinion about how to improve matters. Don't be satisfied, as you might be in a classroom, with mere analysis. In an op-ed article you need to offer recommendations. How exactly should your state protect its environment, or the White House change its foreign policy or parents choose healthier foods for their children? You'll need to do more than call for "more research!" or suggest that opposing parties work out their differences.

Showing is better than discussing. You may remember the Pentagon's overpriced toilet seat that became a symbol of profligate federal spending. You probably don't recall the total Pentagon budget for that year (or for that matter, for the current year). That's because we humans remember colorful details better than dry

facts. When writing an op-ed article, therefore, look for great examples that will bring your argument to life.

Embrace your personal voice. The best of these examples will come from your own experience.

Academics tend to avoid first-person exposition in professional journals, which rarely begin with phrases like “You won't believe what I found when I was working in my lab last month.” When it comes to op-eds, however, you should embrace your own voice whenever possible. If you are a physician, describe the plight of one of your patients, and then tell us how this made you feel personally. If you've worked with poor families, tell a story about one of them to help argue your point. In other words, come down from Mt. Olympus and share details that will reveal your humanity. In so doing, your words will ring truer and the reader will care more about what you are saying. If you are a student or someone else without a fancy degree or title, your personal voice becomes even more important.

Play up your personal connection to the readers. Daily newspapers in many cities are struggling to survive. As they compete with national publications, television, blogs and others, they are playing up their local roots and coverage. Op-ed editors at these papers increasingly prefer authors who live locally or have other local connections. If you're submitting an article to your local paper, this will work in your favor. If you're submitting it in a city where you once lived or worked, be sure to mention this in your cover note and byline. Likewise, if you're writing for a publication that serves a particular profession, ethnic group or other cohort, let them know how you connect personally to their audience.

Use short sentences and paragraphs. Look at some op-ed articles and count the number of words per sentence. You'll probably find the sentences to be quite short. You should use the same style, relying mainly on simple declarative sentences. Cut long paragraphs into two or more shorter ones.

Avoid jargon. If a technical detail is not essential to your argument, don't use it. When in doubt, leave it out. Simple language doesn't mean simple thinking; it means you are being considerate of readers who lack your expertise and are sitting half-awake at their breakfast table or computer screen.

Use the active voice. Don't write: “It is hoped that [or: One would hope that] the government will ...” Instead, say “I hope the government will ...” Active voice is nearly always better than passive voice. It's easier to read, and it leaves no doubt about who is doing the hoping, recommending or other action.

Avoid tedious rebuttals. If you've written your article in response to an earlier piece that made your blood boil, avoid the temptation to prepare a point-by-point rebuttal. It makes you look petty. It's likely that readers didn't see the earlier article and, if they did, they've probably forgotten it. So, just take a deep breath, mention the earlier article once and argue your own case. If you really need to rebut the article, forego an op-ed article and instead write a letter to the editor, which is more appropriate for this purpose.

Acknowledge the other side. People writing op-ed articles sometimes make the mistake of piling on one reason after another why they're right and their opponents are wrong, if not idiots. They'd probably appear more credible, and almost certainly more humble and appealing, if they took a moment to acknowledge the ways in which their opponents are right. When you see experienced op-ed authors saying “to be sure,” that's what they're doing.

Make your ending a winner. As noted, you need a strong opening paragraph, or “lead,” to hook readers. When writing for the op-ed page, it's also important to summarize your argument in a strong final paragraph. That's because many casual readers scan the headline, skim the opening and then read the final paragraph and byline. In fact, one trick many columnists use is to conclude with a phrase or thought that appeared in the opening, thereby closing the circle.

Relax and have fun. Many authors, particularly academics, approach an op-ed article as an exercise in solemnity. Frankly, they'd improve their chances if they'd lighten up, have some fun and entertain the

reader a bit. Newspaper editors despair of weighty articles — known in the trade as “thumb suckers” — and delight in an academic writer who chooses examples from “Entertainment Tonight” as well as from Eminent Authorities.

Don't worry about the headline. The newspaper will write its own headline. You can suggest one, but don't spend a lot of time worrying about it.

Offer graphics. Until recently, newspaper op-ed pages rarely accepted graphics or photos to accompany op-ed article submissions. This tradition is now changing, especially as publications move online. If you have a terrific illustration, photo, video or other asset that might accompany your article, alert the editor when you send it.

How to submit an article. Almost all newspapers and commentary sites now post guidelines about how they prefer to receive op-ed submissions. In general, they provide an e-mail address where you can submit the article electronically, but check first. Always be sure to include your contact information, and say whether you have a photo of yourself available.

Where to submit the article. Here's a wild guess: You're hoping to publish your article in The New York Times, with The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal as backups. Well, welcome to the club. These and other national publications such as USA Today receive a staggering number of submissions, the overwhelming majority of which are rejected. You have a better shot at regional newspapers and, especially, at papers serving your own community. Web sites such as “Slate” and “The Huffington Post” are also gaining in importance. Regardless of where you send it, you'll probably fare best with arguments that are provocative, humorous, personal or unexpected.

David Jarmul, Duke University's associate vice president for news and communications, prepared these guidelines for Duke's op-ed service, which has placed hundreds of articles in newspapers and other outlets across the country and abroad. He previously was the creator and director of a nationally syndicated op-ed article service at the National Academy of Sciences.

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