



How to Write an Op-Ed

We look for timeliness, ingenuity, strength of argument, freshness of opinion, clear writing and newsworthiness. Personal experiences and first-person narrative can be great, particularly when they're in service to a larger idea. So is humor, when it's funny. Does it help to be famous? Not really.

—David Shipley, *The New York Times*

Timing is essential.

Keep track of the news and be ready the moment an issue you're involved in becomes timely. Then, write your op-ed quickly and get it to the newspaper.

Limit the article to 750 words.

Shorter is even better. Newspapers have limited space to offer, and editors generally won't take the time to cut a long article down to size. Besides, you want readers to go all the way to the end.

Make a single point – well.

You can't 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 have no more than 10 seconds to hook a busy reader. 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 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 improve housing? Make health-care more accessible? Create better jobs? Explain why. Appeals to the community's self-interest 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. In an op-ed article you need to offer recommendations. How exactly should Louisiana safeguard its environment, or the White House change its education policy? 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.

Use short sentences and paragraphs.

Look at some news stories 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.

Don't be afraid of the personal voice.

It's good to use the personal voice whenever possible. If you are a social worker, describe the plight of one of your clients. If you've worked with families, tell their stories to help argue your point.

Avoid jargon.

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.

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.

Make your ending a winner.

You're probably familiar with the importance of a strong opening paragraph. But when writing for the op-ed page, it's also important to summarize your argument in a strong final paragraph. In fact, one trick many columnists use is to conclude with a phrase or thought that they used in the opening, thereby closing the circle.

Relax and have fun.

Lighten up, have some fun and entertain the reader a bit. Newspaper editors despair of weighty articles.

— *adapted from David Jarmul, Office of News and Communications at Duke University*