

Op-Ed Guidelines; A review of institutional strategies

University communications specialists seem to be in general agreement about guidelines for writing and placing op-ed articles. This report was gleaned from several sources, mostly Duke University, DePaul University, and the University of Virginia, former U. of I. communications staff member Gary Beaumont and News Bureau director Jeff Unger, who was an editorial writer and editorial board member.)

According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, contributing to the news through op-ed articles is an important way to affect public policy and produce traction on an issue. However, university researchers and media work sometimes have a difficult time working together.

The speed of the media world and the small amount of space journalists have to cover complex scientific issues can make the interaction between scientists and the press challenging. Yet scientific expertise has never been in higher demand in the mainstream media.

Another potential roadblock is personal or institutional advancement. Editors have a sixth sense about self-interest and have a strong reaction against it. Their stock response is often, "We'd be happy to sell you ad space."

David Jarmul, Duke University associate vice president for news and communications, offers this first piece of advice, which is to work with your university's news and public affairs professionals because they interact with media every day and understand their needs.

He also says: "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 ... receive a staggering number of submissions, the overwhelming majority of which are rejected. You have a better shot at regional newspapers and, especially, at local papers, which almost always give preference to writers from the local area."

News bureaus and major universities understand the obstacles to writing appropriate op-ed articles and placing them, but personal experience indicates that success in this area is harder to come by than one would expect.

Newspaper Op-Ed Guidelines

Each newspaper has its own op-ed guidelines. They can vary marginally, but to ignore specific guidelines could become the grounds for rejection, so it is wise to study each publication beforehand. The following is an example of the op-ed Guidelines for The Wall Street Journal.

If you would like to submit an article for consideration, it must be exclusive to the Journal. Your article should be a strong argument about an issue in the news. And it should not be a response to a Journal article; that is a letter to the editor. For an idea of what we are looking for, read the Journal's editorial page on a regular basis.

We prefer that the submission be between 600 to 1,200 jargon-free words, submitted as the body of an email rather than an attachment. A cover note giving a brief summary of your article should be included along with the author's day and evening phone numbers.

We will contact authors on timely articles that are of interest to us as soon as possible. Otherwise, due to the large volume of submissions, for articles that we are not able to use, we will respond within 10 business days. Again, due to the large volume of

submissions, please do not call to confirm receipt or check for a status until 10 business days have elapsed.

All op-eds should be directed to the Editorial Features Editor, Robert Pollock, at edit.features@wsj.com. If you are responding to an article that has appeared in the Journal, please send your comments to Timothy Lemmer, the letters editor, at wsj.ltrs@wsj.com.

Thank you for your cooperation and thank you for your interest in the Journal.

Cordially,

*Robert Pollock
Editorial Features Editor
The Wall Street Journal*

Top 10 Newspapers by Total Average Circulation (Audit Bureau of Circulation, March 2012)

The Wall Street Journal
Circulation: 2,118,315
USA Today
Circulation: 1,817,446
The New York Times
Circulation: 1,586,757
Los Angeles Times
Circulation: 616,575
New York Daily News
Circulation: 579,636
The Mercury News
Circulation: 575,786
New York Post
Circulation: 555,327
The Washington Post
Circulation: 507,615
Chicago Sun-Times
Circulation: 422,335

Op-Ed Articles: How to Write and Place Them

From their first day in the classroom, journalists are taught the four principles of newsworthiness: timeliness, significance, proximity and human interest. These concepts should guide op-ed writers.

Timeliness

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 television show – that's what readers want to read and op-ed editors want to publish.

- Link your issue explicitly to something happening in the news.

- If you're a researcher studying cancer, 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.
- Corollary – If the piece you have in mind is tied to the news, don't wait to send it out because one of two things will happen:
 - You'll wait too long and it will no longer be newsworthy.
 - Someone else will beat you to the draw, and the paper won't be interested in publishing a second piece on the same topic.

Significance

Pick a topic that matters. It should address the gruff, old city editor's questions: So what? Why should readers care? How does the topic affect them? No one has to read an opinion piece. It's up to the writer to make it worth the reader's time.

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.

Proximity

Most op-ed articles deal with issues that dominate the **LOCAL** news. Reporters and editors earn a living by serving their readership, so articles that have no local interest are often rejected.

- The best way to determine appropriate themes for a particular publication is to become familiar with it. Each day, read the editorial pages of the publications you would like to target. Learn to recognize the style, length and tone of successful submissions and fashion your effort similarly.
- Most importantly, have something fresh and original to say.
- Corollary – Newspapers prefer to use local experts, so a Washington, D.C., expert has more cache with the Washington Post than someone from, say, Illinois. There are exceptions, but these are extraordinary.

Human Interest

Human interest stories appeal to emotion. They aim to evoke responses such as amusement or sadness. It's okay to use human interest in an op-ed article.

- Corollary – Local human interest stories are preferred by editors. There are exceptions, but these are extraordinary.

Op-Ed Style

The writing process

- Ask, what is the message you want to get across?
- List all your arguments in no particular order.
- Pick four or five arguments that will most appeal to your readers.
- Write your first draft. Connect your theme to your peg in the first paragraph, followed by one to three paragraphs for each supporting reason, with the most important reasons first. One or two paragraphs should conclude by reinforcing your theme.

- Now read your draft and ask: What is the most powerful paragraph here? Is it the closing paragraph? Does a paragraph about one of the four or five arguments point up a particularly absurd part of the plan?
- Whichever one it is, rewrite the op-ed with the most powerful, most exciting paragraph first to grab the reader's attention, elaborate with two or three supporting points in the following paragraphs. Make sure your paragraphs are short and contain one main idea. Use facts, statistics and studies to support your arguments.

Get to the point

Everyone is busy. You're competing with TV, radio, the Internet, work, kids, spouses, pets, laundry, yard work, soccer practice, violin lessons and yoga classes. Grab the reader's attention in the first couple of lines.

You're not writing for Science or The Quarterly Journal of Economics. 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.

Pointed view

Opinion editors look for articles that are provocative and succinctly argue particular points of view on issues that are dominating the headlines. They do not want pieces that argue all sides of an issue, so express an opinion. Argue your point. Urge action. Warn of danger. That's what opinion pieces are about. They are not about presenting background material with an "on-the-one-hand-but-on-the-other-hand" approach.

Offer specific recommendations

An op-ed article is not a news story that describes a situation. Instead, it's an article about your opinion and how to improve matters. Don't be satisfied, as you might in a classroom, with mere analysis. In an op-ed article you need to offer recommendations.

Clarity

Op-eds that appear in general-circulation publications should be comprehensible to all readers. Use "plain English." Op-eds should conform to the stylistic rules of "The Associated Press Stylebook." Op-eds that do not require editing are most likely to be accepted. If the editors can't follow your argument, they certainly won't ask their readers to figure it out.

Accuracy

Double-check all your facts, the spelling of names and places, and make certain you have no grammatical errors. Even simple mistakes can hurt your credibility and cause an otherwise well-written piece to be rejected.

Observe the space limitation

Limit the article to 750-800 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.

Just the words, please

Don't use subheads, footnotes, graphs, tables or other illustrations.

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.

Avoid acronyms

It's better to repeatedly spell out terms such as "environmental impact statement" than to lose the reader in a jungle of EISs, EPAs, VMTs and TDMs.

Showing is better than telling

Look for great examples that will bring your argument to life. Use concrete examples, telling details, dollar figures and a few compelling numbers. Build your piece around one main idea, bolstered by a few supporting points. A short quote or two is OK. Write for an intelligent reader who has no specialized knowledge of the subject. Bear in mind that many newspapers are edited for an 8th-grade reading level.

Use short sentences and paragraphs

Review 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.

First person is okay

Don't be afraid of the personal voice. That's the whole point, to voice your personal opinion. However, the op-ed article should not be about you or your institution. If the article seems self-serving, editors will not use it. Instead, the purpose of the article should focus on the public good.

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, avoid the temptation to rebut.

Create a winning ending

A strong opening paragraph is essential to hook the reader, but a strong conclusion is also important. One trick many columnists use is to conclude with a phrase or thought that they used in the opening, thereby closing the circle.

Exclusivity

National newspapers usually demand exclusivity on op-eds they publish, and it is often preferred by local newspapers as well. It is much more difficult to get published in national publications due to the increased volume of submissions. If you are planning to submit to multiple publications, give each paper one week to consider the piece. Review each newspaper's guidelines, which may have more advice on this issue.

Identification

Include your name under the headline of your submission. A short one- or two-sentence statement of your credentials should be included at the end of the article noting your name,

academic title, department and expertise in the area. This explanation is normally 25 words or less.

If you are writing a letter to the editor and stating a personal point of view unrelated to your area of expertise, it is not appropriate to include your university affiliation.

Relax and have fun

Savor the intellectual exercise, the chance to polish your skills, and the possibility that somebody somewhere will see your piece, read it and be moved, or reach a new understanding of the world because of it. 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 Kierkegaard.

It's OK to follow up

A few days after you submit your op-ed, you should place a follow-up call to the op-ed editor to check on their interest in running the article.

Be persistent

Don't be discouraged if you write a good piece and can't place it. There are far more writers who want to be published than space to publish them. Good opinion pieces are rejected every day for a multitude of good reasons: the paper recently ran one on a similar topic; the paper has just accepted one on a similar topic; the paper's main competitor just ran one on a similar topic; the editors think the topic has been overdone; the news it relates to is old. There are also bad reasons for rejection, which are, nonetheless, just as effective: the editor fails to grasp the importance of the topic; the editor is bored by the topic; the editor hated the teacher of the topic in high school; the editor just got through a nasty divorce and is rejecting everything submitted by writers named Doreen (or, alternatively, Bill). The bottom line is, the more opinion pieces you write and the more rejections you collect, the better your chances of placing one eventually. You can't win if you don't play.

Conclusion

It is possible to follow all of these guidelines and fail to place an op-ed article. On the other hand, one could find op-ed articles that break many of these rules. The bottom line is, to write and place an op-ed article, one must give the editor what they want on the day they are choosing from the myriad of information available to them.