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**How to Write a Good Op-Ed**

*Adapted with Minor Changes from a Guide by Duke University Communications*

**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).

**Make a single point — well.** You cannot solve all of the world’s problems in 460 words (the Buffalo News limit for Another Voice pieces). 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, 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. 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. 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.

**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: “Getting a flu shot is recommended.” Instead write: “The Surgeon General recommends getting a flu shot.” Active voice is nearly always better than passive voice. It’s easier to read, and it leaves no doubt about who is doing the 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, 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.

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