

# Op-Eds: Framing the Debate

## Letters to the Editor and Online Feedback

Most media outlets have some mechanism for viewers and readers to express their opinions on important issues: op-eds, freelance articles, essays, letters to the editor, and online feedback through email, listserv, or bulletin board discussion groups. Using these outlets, you, the activist, have a unique opportunity to position an issue or frame the debate on an issue in your own words. Moreover, for every comment a news outlet receives, they assume there are hundreds, if not thousands of readers, viewers and listeners who feel the same way. A few quality letters can carry real weight and make a critical difference.

Readers of newspaper editorials and opinion pieces tend to be decision makers sensitive to public opinion, whether their community consists of neighborhood residents or world financiers. Presenting information and ideas to them in a coherent written form lets nonprofit groups and agencies, especially those with limited funds, reach important and influential audiences.

## Op-Eds and Essays

### What *is* an Op-Ed?

An op-ed is an essay or guest column published in the opinion section of a newspaper. These are called op-eds because they usually appear opposite the editorial page. Newspapers receive dozens, perhaps hundreds, of submissions every day.

Editors usually use specific selection criteria for op-eds, including but not exclusively:

- 1 A provocative idea concerning any subject
- 2 An opinion on a current issue that is controversial, unexpected, authoritative, or new
- 3 An issue that is current, or timely
- 4 A call to arms on a neglected subject
- 5 Bite and wit on a current issue
- 6 An author with name recognition

Keeping the above criteria in mind, pay attention to current events covered in the media. Look for new and provocative angles on those issues. An op-ed page is not a forum for announcements of events, status reports, or the blatant promotion of organizations or obscure causes. Most editors look for pieces with sharp opinion, advocacy, denunciations, controversy, and astonishment.

Editors want the opinion pages to stimulate community discussion and drive public debate. They want people to say “Wow! Did you see that op-ed today?” Failing that, they want to elicit a “hmmmm,” a reaction of surprise at something amazing, interesting, or outrageous.

Editors of local and regional papers look for pieces with community interest or a strong local angle. Unless there is considerable public debate already, they will be less receptive to op-eds about national issues or broad, generic ideas. Tell a local story about a real person, family or group and how your issue has affected them.

Timeliness is another important consideration. Even if your op-ed does not break new ground, you may be able to find something current to which to relate your subject:

- 7 A holiday
- 8 An anniversary of an event or someone's death or birth
- 9 A day of remembrance
- 10 An election
- 11 An upcoming conference
- 12 A new report
- 13 A vote in Congress
- 14 An action in your local or state government.

Opinion pages want to be relevant to ongoing events, and properly crafted, your op-ed can help achieve this goal.

Finally, the author's by-line can make a huge difference. Having the article signed by a local or national expert, your group's president, a member of the clergy, or a well-known politician could make it more likely to be printed.

### **Prepare Before You Write**

Call the newspaper to confirm the name of the editorial or op-ed page editor, and find out any submission criteria for that particular publication. Larger papers, including *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, have a recorded explanation on how to submit an op-ed, and how you will be notified if your submission has been accepted or declined. Some newspapers accept op-eds by fax, and others do not. Writers should also ask about the editor's approval process. In most cases, the newspaper will call you to clarify some of the facts only when they have decided to print your piece.

### **Set Your Goals**

Before putting pen to paper, think through what message you want to deliver. What are your goals for this op-ed? Recruiting volunteers? Igniting a grassroots campaign? Sustaining or increasing public funding? Passing new legislation? Educating the public?

Defining the goal will help you to determine which audience you need to reach: the general public, local or national policymakers, or specific groups like voters, teachers, health care professionals, or senior citizens.

Defining the audience will also help you to determine which outlet is best suited for your piece: local daily or weekly paper, a professional journal, a state or regional paper like the *Denver Post* or *Boston Globe*, or the much more competitive national papers like the *Los Angeles Times* or *USA Today*.

## Let's Get Started: 10 Steps to Writing Your Piece

15 Try to reduce your point to a single sentence. For example, "Every child deserves a family." Or, "Cutting Healthy Start completely is a stupid idea." Or, "California's mental health system favors adults."

16 Then test your sentence for the "wow" test, or the "hmmm" test. If it does not get this reaction from you or two other readers, the point needs sharpening.

17 Any point worth making will have to be defended. Muster your best three or four supporting arguments, and state each one in a single paragraph. Be as specific as possible.

18 Raise your opponents' arguments, and challenge them with your own facts, withering irony, condescension or whatever is appropriate, but deal with them.

19 Ask yourself: What is the minimum background information a reader absolutely needs to have in order to grasp this point? Write two paragraphs that summarize this information.

20 Imagine your target reader browsing through the newspaper on a workday morning, rushing to find something interesting. What kind of statement might catch her attention? If you can raise questions, surprise, intrigue or baffle your reader into reading beyond the first paragraph, you stand a chance the editor will let you put the entire op-ed in the paper.

21 Now, write the piece. Draft about 1,000 words (use your word processor's word count tool to monitor this). Restate your key points in the final paragraph.

22 Now cut out half a page. Eliminate all repetition. Trim word, not ideas. Check every word and see what you can eliminate. Convert passive voice sentences to active ones. Give the piece to someone else and ask him to review it. Do any rewriting yourself. Don't leave it to the discretion of the newspaper editor.

23 Your final piece should be about 750 words. Don't forget to include your name, title, and affiliation at the end. Remember, whether this op-ed was intended as a single action or the first phase of a many-faceted media campaign, you're on your way.

24 Submit the piece with a short cover letter that includes your name and phone number. You will be notified if your article is considered for publication. Calling and badgering the staff at the op-ed page may not help and could hurt you. Be patient, it can take weeks for a piece to appear, even an op-ed with a time-sensitive point. Stay ready to update and revise in the hours before publication.

If your op-ed is rejected, you may want to make revisions and submit it to another publication. Do not despair. Try again in a few weeks or months on another topic. Your piece may have arrived during a very busy week with much competition. Often it is just a matter of your op-ed being at the

right place at the right time.

If your piece is printed, make copies and send them to colleagues, elected officials, funders, reporters and others who can help move your issue. This can be an excellent way of getting your message to key influentials, helping to frame the debate. An op-ed can serve as a springboard to talk show appearances, panel discussions or conference workshops.

### **Other Ways to Write and Be Counted**

Letters to the editor, emails and interactive feedback are also important means of communicating your ideas. Letters to the editor do make a difference, provided that you make your key points carefully, and are specific, concise, and to the point. Newspapers and magazines will usually use only two or three paragraphs at most.

National television news magazine programs like CBS's *60 Minutes*, have a regular "letters" feature on each program. Some of these prime-time news shows ask viewers to respond via email to a specific segment as it airs.

MSNBC and other cable networks regularly host chat rooms on their websites with journalists and prominent newsmakers. These provide an excellent opportunity for you to deliver messages directly to the people who can best disseminate it further.

Watch, read, listen and surf for ways you – the activist, policymaker or consumer – can have an impact on decision makers in the media and at every policymaking level. Way to go! You're on your way.