

NCAN Member Advocacy: Guide to Writing an Op-Ed

One effective way to advocate for your priorities is by writing an op-ed. To serve you in this effort, the National College Attainment Network (NCAN) has drafted a guide of general tips and an outline to help you get started. Writing as an advocacy tool allows you to bring attention to an issue and share personal experiences. Your advocacy plays a great role in policy change.

Suggestions

- **Keep it brief.** Conventional wisdom says an op-ed should not exceed 700 words. Check with the media organization you are targeting on its requirements. With word count in mind, your op-ed should be focused on a single topic and employ short sentences/paragraphs.
- **Be strategic about the author.** Seek someone with [unique expertise](#) and authority, such as a student, leading practitioner, board member, or college president to author the piece. Better still if they are offering an unexpected opinion that challenges readers' assumptions.
- **Include a call to action.** Invite your reader to be a part of the solution by offering a specific recommendation. State the call to action in the opening and restate it at the end of your piece.
- **Use stories.** Humanizing a complex issue will help you reach your audience, especially given that policy debates are often reduced to matters of technical changes.
- **Consider timing.** Knowing when to elevate the discussion of an issue is key. Timing can determine how your piece will be received, and how it will be acted upon, by your intended audience. Strike when the iron is hot, or the issue is in the news!

Outline

- **Opening**
 - The lede, or introductory sentence, is important to grab your audience's attention.
 - Distill the issue in concise and simple terms; assume your audience knows little about the subject.
 - Balance the right amount of context and framing to educate your audience.
 - Personalize the issue to an appropriate extent.
 - Involve your audience in your recommended solution or call to action.
- **Body**
 - Support your solution/call to action with compelling arguments and verifiable facts.

- There's no rule here but limit your body to only the strongest arguments in favor of your issue. This could be one argument or three, but the priority is to introduce and organize the content in a way that's manageable for your audience.
- For the sake of transparency and gaining your audience's trust, you may want to state an oppositional argument, while also refuting its substance or diminishing this argument's magnitude.
- You may use data points to support your arguments, but op-eds traditionally avoid getting too into the weeds on issues.
- **Conclusion**
 - Close out your piece by restating the issue and your recommended solution/call to action for your intended audience.

Tips for Pitching and Promoting an Op-ed

- Have the author send the pitch directly to the publication with a short cover note explaining why it's timely and important. Reference any recent related coverage of theirs.
- Keep the pitch short and clear.
- Develop relationships with editors at publications where you aspire to place op-eds. When they reach out to you with questions, be responsive and helpful. Make it a two-way street.
- Target publications that fit with the piece. Pitch a trade publication like EdWeek with a wonky topic, Chalkbeat regional sites for state news, and U.S. News & World Report for general audiences.
 - Read more [here](#) via The OpEd Project.
- Once it's published, circulate the piece to your partners and ask them to share it on social media and in any media roundups or newsletters they curate.
- Share it on social media and tag your partners and policymakers who are working on this issue. Always be positive.

Examples of NCAN and NCAN Member Op-Eds

- "[Students of Color Need Our Support](#)" - Kim Cook, CEO, NCAN, *The Hill*, June 2023
- "[The Support Court Revealed What We Already Know](#)" - Steve Colon, CEO, Bottom Line, *The Hechinger Report*, July 2023
- "[FAFSA is an inaccessible journey to aid for low-income students](#)" - Francesca Testa, senior, Franklin & Marshall College, *Pennsylvania Capital Star*, May 2023

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