

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING AN OPINION EDITORIAL

An op-ed is an opinion essay that should have a clear point of view or argument, supported by specific facts and evidence.

Include personal stories and experiences, or the story of a patient in your care. The language needs to be relatable and accessible to the average reader. You are writing for a newspaper audience, not a medical or academic journal. Avoid using technical terms or professional jargon. Writing an opinion piece that is relevant and understandable not only makes it more interesting and persuasive to your reader, but also much more likely that a newspaper will publish it.

Basic Op-Ed Format

Lead paragraph: Try to grab readers right away with your first sentence; make them want to read more. Start with an interesting story or example, like an experience you had with a particular patient, an experience you've had as part of your clinical practice that encapsulates your point. Be sure to de-identify individual patients, and exclude story components that could identify a patient, even if they were not named.

Supporting paragraphs: Now that you've stated your point and grabbed readers' attention, build with facts, statistics, and anecdotes. In the first few paragraphs, tie your story or example from the lead paragraph to your thesis or the main point you're trying to convey. Be sure to include a sentence that crystallizes your opinion and call to action early in your piece.

Wrap it up: Make the final sentence as compelling as the first one. If you started with an example, bring the story full circle by referencing your original point. Leave readers with information about what needs to be done next. 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.

Tips for a Successful Op-Ed

Track the news and jump at opportunities. Timing is essential. When an issue is dominating the news, 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 physician advocating for the importance of safely storing firearms, for instance, then start off by discussing the latest avoidable death by a firearm that wasn't properly secured.

Different newspapers and websites have different guidelines, but, in general, the upper limit of an op-ed is 750 words—and shorter is often better. Keep your essay short and make your point clearly and persuasive. Some academic authors feel like they need more room to explain their argument, but unfortunately, newspapers have strict length guidelines and editors generally won't take the time to cut a long article down to size.

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 opinion piece, offer specific recommendations (e.g. Congress and the White House should pass legislation that requires extended background checks). Additionally, tell readers why they should care. Appeals to self-interest usually are most effective.

Be informal and embrace your personal voice. Unlike professional journals, op-eds are written in first person, and should feature your own voice. Feel free to speak from multiple identities—for example, talking about experiences as both a physician, and as a parent or grandparent.

Promote personal connections to readers. Op-ed editors at local/regional papers prefer authors who live locally or have local connections. If you're submitting an article to your local paper, this will work in your favor. If not, explicitly state the connection: a city where you once lived or worked, a publication that serves a particular cohort, or if your piece addresses an issue of local importance to that publication.

Avoid jargon. Details about a clinical condition or treatment or hospitalization can be included when relevant to your core thesis or metaphor—but you'll need to include room to explain. If able, avoid medical jargon.

Use the active voice. Don't write: "It is hoped that the Senator will..." Instead, say "I urge Senator to take [a specific action]."

Acknowledge the other side. People writing op-ed articles sometimes make the mistake of failing to acknowledge, and then refute the arguments of the opposition. **Address and then correct the record about biased assumptions and false claims.**

Comprehensive set of tips, op-ed guidelines and submission links for many mainstream newspapers and online journals: <https://www.theopedproject.org/>

Adapted by DFA's Gun Violence Prevention Action Team from sources including the Arnold Foundation, and Duke University.