

Ten Steps to Writing an Op Ed

An op-ed is an essay intended for publication *opposite* the *editorial* page of a newspaper. Scores of submissions come in to a newspaper – *The Washington Post* receives more than 400 every day of the week and prints two or three per day maximum.

Editors want some very concrete things in the op eds they choose to print, more or less in this order:

1. A **provocative idea** on any subject.
2. A **sharp opinion on a current issue** that is controversial, unexpected, authoritative, and/or newsworthy.
3. A **call to action** on a neglected subject.
4. A **new or unexpected slant** on a current issue.
5. **Bite and wit** on a current issue.

Notice the stress is on what's controversial, provocative, new, current. Without a sharp point, neither a pen nor a sword is of much use. Without a forceful point to make, an op ed is doomed to rejection.

This makes the op ed page hostile to announcements of events, status reports or even plain old news. It loves blunt opinion, advocacy, denunciation, outrage, astonishment—all the heavy emotions. Editors want to create buzz. They want people to say, “Wow! Did you see that op ed today?” Failing that, they want to elicit a “Hmm. That’s amazing/fascinating/outrageous.” They want to be **leaders** in shaping public debate, and you will do best by joining in that goal.

Before you begin to write:

1. Try to reduce your point to a single sentence. The United Nations needs more funding. Women’s rights are being abused. Earth’s future is at stake this week in Congress.
2. See if your point-sentence passes the “wow” test or the “hmm” test. If not, the point needs sharpening.
3. Imagine your target reader: she’s someone whose attention you’ve been courting. She’s flipping through the paper on a workday morning, scanning for something interesting, gulping coffee, checking the time. What first line, related however distantly to your subject, might catch her eye? If you can intrigue, surprise, alarm or baffle your imaginary reader past the first paragraph, you stand a chance that the editor will let you put the whole thing in the paper.
4. Any point worth making will have to be defended. Muster your best four supporting arguments or data bits and write a sentence on each one. Be as specific and as articulate as possible. Never start a sentence with “there is/are” and avoid the passive voice.
5. Raise the opposition’s best arguments and demolish them. Use countervailing facts, withering irony or whatever is appropriate, but deal with them.
6. Let yourself become emotional. Get carried away with the drama, significance, injustice, triumph, outrage, need of your point, and wax lyrical—for one paragraph. Write five such paragraphs and choose the best one.

7. What is the minimum background a reader absolutely must have in order to grasp your point? Write two paragraphs that summarize this background.
8. Now, put these elements together and write the piece. Write 1,000 words (four double-spaced pages) maximum. Single-space between sentences.
9. Edit your prose. Be ruthless with yourself. Rewrite “There is/are” sentences. Look at every word ending in -ly and eliminate most if not all of the adverbs. Convert passive-voice sentences to active ones. Look critically at all your metaphors, similes and pet phrases to make sure they are not clichés. Translate all jargon into English.
10. When you are sure that every remaining word is a pearl, give the piece to someone else and ask him or her to cut more, so that the piece is no longer than 750 words. Better you should cut than the newspaper editor.

Good luck!

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