

Op-Ed Articles

How to Write and Place Them

David Jarmul, Duke University

Op-Eds can reach millions of readers, swaying hearts and changing minds. It can help reshape a public debate and affect policy. It also can bring you considerable recognition for less effort than it takes to write a professional monograph or journal article. Moreover, effective op-ed articles reflect well on both the author and their institution. Here are some guidelines to help you get started:

Track the news and jump at opportunities.

- **Timing is essential.** As a former *New York Times* op-ed page editor wrote: “When people like Saddam Hussein and George Bush go on the warpath, op-ed editors don’t like to hang around waiting to see what next week’s mail will bring. And they can’t imagine that people will read an article, no matter how wonderful, that bemoans the perennial budget mess when all anybody can think is: ‘Does he have the bomb?’” Our experience at Duke reflects this; authors are most successful when they track the news.

Limit the article to 750 words.

- **Shorter is even better.** Some academic authors insist they need more room to explain their argument. Unfortunately, newspapers have limited space to offer, and editors generally won’t take the time to cut a long article down to size.

Make a single point – well.

- **You cannot solve all of the world’s problems in 750 words.** 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’re not writing for *Science* or *Cell*.** 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.** Don’t be satisfied, as you might in a classroom, with mere analysis. In an op-ed article you need to offer recommendations. How exactly should the United States fight AIDS, or the White House promote better health care? 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.

- **When writing an op-ed article, look for great examples that will bring your argument to life.** 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.

Use short sentences and paragraphs.

- **Cut long paragraphs into two or more shorter ones.** Look at some stories in the New York Times or your local newspaper, 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.

Don’t be afraid of the personal voice.

- **When it comes to op-eds, it’s good to use the personal voice whenever possible.** Academics often avoid first-person exposition in professional journals, which rarely begin with phrases like “You won’t believe what I found when I was working in my lab last month.” However, with op-eds, the opposite is true. If you are a physician, describe the plight of one of your patients. If you’ve worked with anthrax, tell us what you worried about.

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.

- **Active voice is nearly always better than passive voice.** It's easier to read, and it leaves no doubt about who is doing the hoping, recommending or other action. For example, don't write: "It is hoped that [or: One would hope that] the government will . . ." Instead, say "I hope the government will . . ."

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.

Make your ending a winner.

- **When writing for the op-ed page, it's important to summarize your argument in a strong final paragraph.** You're probably familiar with the importance of a strong opening paragraph, or "lead," that hooks readers. It's just as important to have an engaging ending as well. That's because many casual readers scan the headline, skim the opening column and then read only the final paragraph and byline. In fact, one trick many columnists use is to conclude with a phrase or thought that they used 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. Newspaper editors despair of weighty articles – known in the trade as "thumb suckers" – and delight in an academic writer who chooses examples from "Entertainment Tonight" as well as from Lewis Thomas or E.O. Wilson.

Where to submit the article.

- Here's a wild guess: You're hoping to publish your article in *The New York Times*, with *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* as backups. Well, welcome to the club. These and other national publications, such as *Newsweek* and *USA Today*, receive a staggering number of submissions, the overwhelming majority of which are rejected. You have a better shot at regional newspapers and, especially, at local papers. Web sites such as "Slate" are also gaining in importance. Scientists and medical researchers have appeared in almost every market and, as always, they've fared best with arguments that are provocative, humorous, personal or unexpected. Be sure to include your contact information, and say whether you have a photo of yourself available. Most papers now accept articles by e-mail.

David Jarmul is Duke University's associate vice president for news and communications. He was the creator and director of a nationally syndicated op-ed article service at the National Academy of Sciences.