Tips for Writing Op-eds and Letters to the Editor

Op-ed articles are a great way to reshape a public debate and affect policy. Letters to the Editor (LTEs) also contribute to the public discourse.

If you want to write a piece that will add to the debate and get published, see if it meets the OPTIC criteria...

Original – Are you writing something that's fresh and different? Find a new way to make an argument, offer new research and make sure you are writing original content and not just quoting from what's already out there.

Personal – Why are you the right person to provide this point of view? Don't be afraid to offer personal insights and stories. Or pitch a piece in the voice of someone who is directly affected. We can help them draft their piece.

Timely – Why now? Finding a good news hook is often the key to getting a piece published. Think about why this piece is relevant now and see if you can work a current event into your piece. Just allow some time for editors to review.

Informative – Did the reader learn something? Make sure the reader comes away from your piece knowing more than they did before. Op-eds aren't just a chance to rant or rave on an issue; they should enrich the reader's knowledge.

Controversial/Counterintuitive – Are people arguing about this issue? Is my take on this unexpected? Writing about a hot issue, arguing an unexpected point of view, or co-authoring a piece with someone who the reader might not expect will help your piece stand out.

It's important to stick to the above criteria. If we're trying to pitch an op-ed, we don't want to merely reiterate things that have happened in the news or simply restate our position on a topic. Whenever possible we want to lift up personal examples, or affected people's voices. At all times we need to ask ourselves: what story am I trying to tell? Is an op-ed the best way to do that? Are there other tactics that may work better?

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Letters to the Editor are a great (and quick) way to respond to articles. Make sure that you specifically identify the article you are responding to in your LTE and that you make your argument succinctly. Check word limits, since they're rarely over 200 words. LTEs are usually in direct response to a piece that has already appeared, rather than introducing a new argument in an op-ed. They also are generally reserved for responding to pieces that appeared in print, as they in turn will be featured in the print edition.

Structuring Your Op-Ed

Idea or Lede: Where you draw your audience in and make clear what your op-ed is about. You can be witty or personal - just try to have a compelling entry into your piece. Find a way to use current news here to ensure that op-ed editors and readers will understand why you're writing this *now*. Just try to avoid making it too dry by repeating something people already know, or by being to cliché ("Imagine you're…" is a major trope to avoid in advocacy writing).

Argument: Your overall thesis should go here. Have a strong few sentences or paragraph here that will let the reader know what your point of view is. Use the following graphs, or "evidence," to explain why you're right.

Evidence: Try to give up to three real-life stories and/or data that will feed into your overall argument.

Wind back to original assertion: Having laid out the evidence, make the case for why this supports your idea or call to action

Conclusion: Circle back to your lede

<u>Some more tips:</u>

- When working to publish an op-ed, it's critical that you submit it only to one news outlet at a time.
- If you don't get a timely response (usually at least 24 hours), email to let that outlet know you are moving on to another publication.
- If we try three different outlets without a piece being picked up, we may fall back and see if the tactic still makes sense, or if we need to adjust the piece. You don't want to try too many outlets since you don't want to

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exhaust your contacts.

- If you're making a call to action, make sure to do it in a way that doesn't sound too much like an email appeal, which can be a bit more specific. Above all, editors are interested in telling a story for their readers, not providing a platform for an organization to advertise itself. Take care when walking that line.
- Look online for the publication's specific rules for op-ed lengths and Letters to the Editor submission guidelines. Op-eds are generally 650 - 800 words and LTEs are generally between 100 - 250 words long. Make sure you check the outlet's submission guidelines and adhere to them closely.
- When thinking of where you might submit your piece, consider the audience of the outlet. Are there outlets that might not be among the more obvious choices that might speak to an audience we want to reach? Are there niche publications that might be more open to a specific angle than others?

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