



How To Write An Op-Ed

What is an Op-Ed?

An Op-ed is a strong and informed opinion column about a specific topic or subject. An op-ed can have a targeted audience or can be written for the general public. Op-eds are usually written by organizations, activists, experts, opinion leaders, or private citizens. The goal of an op-ed is to present a clear and dynamic opinion on an issue that has the capability to **inform** and **engage** the reader.

Dos & Don'ts For Op-Eds

Do stay on message. Before you begin to write, please identify why you are crafting this op-ed. What topic area are you focusing on, why does it matter to you, and who is your targeted audience? The answers to these questions will help inform your writing.

Do know your intended outlet. Every news outlet has a different voice, different demographics, and different guidelines around op-eds. Please familiarize yourself with the outlet's rules before you send them your material.

Do use your own voice and narratives. Your experiences with an issue--immigration, abortion, sex abuse--are important and critical. These personal narratives appeals to audiences, please include that in your op-ed.

Do focus your Op-Ed. Because many of our issues and campaigns are quite broad, it is easy to talk about everything at once. Focus your op-ed on one issue and make sure that you are covering it thoroughly.

Do grab their attention immediately. An attention grabbing opening is the best way to get someone to continue to read. Place emphasis on the first three sentences of your op-ed to set the narrative and to grab the spotlight.

Do know and state the facts. Your opinion is important, but having statistical evidence to support your opinions is critical in formulating a cohesive op-ed. Please make sure that within your column, you are citing relevant facts and stats that drive your point home.

Do bring in topical events and issues. Many of NOW's issue areas and campaigns transcend time. However, it is important to incorporate relevant material. This increases the chances of your op-ed being chosen.

Do use universal language. Writing an op-ed is not the same as writing an academic paper. Most newspaper articles are written on an 8th grade reading level. Attempt to take very high brow concepts and make them palatable and understandable to all audiences.

Do keep it concise. An op-ed should be between 500 and 1000 words. Make sure that every word counts.

Don't forget to edit your own work. You are your harshest critic; make sure that what you send out is the best representation of your writing skills.

Elements of a Good Op-ed for Activists

A) A Strong Introduction: An Introduction that Introduces the Topic, the Issue, and Your Voice.

New York Times, 3/14/12, "Why I Am Leaving Goldman Sachs":

"Today is my last day at Goldman Sachs. After almost 12 years at the firm — first as a summer intern while at Stanford, then in New York for 10 years, and now in London — I believe I have worked here long enough to understand the trajectory of its culture, its people and its identity. And I can honestly say that the environment now is as toxic and destructive as I have ever seen it."

Why It Works: It sets the tone of the piece, introduces the author, his perspective, and what he will spend the rest of the column discussing. It is also highly provocative, due to the relatively insular nature of the industry he is writing about. His candor draws you in.

Washington Post, 12/4/15, "When Mass Shootings Become Ordinary":

"An old love song speaks of "the little ordinary things that everyone ought to do." That phrase used to cover instructions such as: "Take out the trash," "brush your teeth," "close cover before striking," "look both ways before crossing." Ordinary things.

9/11 changed all that.

Now "things that everyone ought to do" include "remove your shoes" and "leave liquids at home." And "little ordinary things" involve pat-downs, full-body scans, concrete planters in front of buildings and the horror of the unattended package. No more "none of your business." Now it's "see something, say something." All the ordinary things of our day.

Why It Works: It is dramatic and captivating, using two juxtaposing images to set up the rest of the column. It crafts a specific narrative that places readers in a mindset to ask, "What is normal?"

B) Strong Facts and Statistics About An Issue:

New York Times, 8/30/16, “We Need Abortion Laws Based On Science”:

“...Not only is the law misguided; it also led to worse outcomes for women’s health. We examined medical charts from almost 3,000 patients at four Ohio clinics getting medication abortions before and after the law. After the law, the percentage of patients requiring additional medical treatment rose from 5 percent to 14 percent — including, in some cases, an in-clinic procedure to complete the abortion, which is what many women were trying to avoid by opting for a medication abortion in the first place.

The four clinics we studied saw an 80 percent decline in medication abortions between 2010 and 2014, compared with a 17 percent decline in all abortions over the same time period. Medication abortions declined from 22 percent of all abortions in these clinics in 2010, before the law, to 5 percent after the law in 2014.”

Why it Works: The facts presented in this op-ed are not simply facts derived from the internet, they are facts from a study performed by the writer. They give validity to the author’s argument and lend authority to her voice.

Cosmopolitan, 2/21/17, “Our Laws Period-Shame Women--So I’m Going To Change Them”:

“...You would not believe what female inmates go through to access menstrual hygiene products. The ACLU of Michigan filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of eight female prisoners at Muskegon County Jail because (among other things) the prison denied inmates access to menstrual hygiene products, a condition considered inhumane and degrading. Female inmates in Connecticut only get five pads per week to *split* with their bunkmate, which means they may have to use a single pad for multiple days. I cannot imagine how humiliating that must feel. My bill would require each state to give female inmates and detainees as many tampons or pads as they need, whenever they need them — at no cost.”

Why it Works: This op-ed, by elected official Grace Meng, presents the facts in a storytelling fashion. She does not use literal facts and figures, yet she gets the point across by providing different types of examples of the same story.

C) A Clear and Concise Declaration of the Author’s Opinion Regarding the Issue

Washington Post, 10/22/15, “Make College Free For All”:

“In my view, education is essential for personal and national well-being. We live in a highly competitive, global economy, and if our economy is to be strong, we need the best-educated workforce in the world. We won’t achieve that if, every year, hundreds of thousands of bright young people cannot afford to go to college while millions more leave school deeply in debt. We need to ensure that every young person in this country who wishes to go to college can get the education that he or she desires, without going into debt and regardless of his or her family’s income.”

Why It Works: The author of this piece very directly and clearly states his support for free college and articulates why free college is necessary. Going into anecdotal details, the author quickly points to a myriad of points about the need for free college and what he believes the result would be.

Teen Vogue, 2/1/17, "I Am A Priest, and I Am Pro-Choice":

And that is where the Church can find its point of entry: in offering people making these decisions every measure of mercy they need to live wise and whole lives. It is the act of looking people in the eye and saying, "I trust you. I love you," not, "My personal religious convictions on this matter should prevent you from seeking out the affordable, safe health care that you need." This act leads people of faith and goodwill to seek out ways in which we can support and elevate organizations that offer life-saving reproductive health care and education to people of all ages, races, socio-economic levels, sexual orientations, and gender identities, especially organizations like Planned Parenthood and SisterReach.

Why It Works: The author of this piece uses his own identity as a priest to situate his opinion on abortion. He also makes a statement on what he feels the relationship between the very religious and abortion should look like. Finally, he takes careful time to uplift other organizations doing the work.

D) A Personal Anecdote That Grounds The Story and Gives Validity to the Author

Vice, 2/8/17, "How Trump's Travel Ban Hurts Iranian Americans Like Me":

"As a high school senior in California, I lived through the events of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis. For many Americans of Iranian heritage—and especially those who, unlike me, immigrated in the early days of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq War—those events were psychologically scarring and left them feeling between worlds. While I was too young to understand the politics of the fissure between Iran and the US and the reasons for the hostage crisis, I saw clearly how easily the media and Americans' global ignorance could result in vindictive rhetoric and for some even calling for the "nuking of Iran."

Why it Works: the author's exploration of her own identity as both Iranian and American helps cement and secure her place as a voice of authority on these issues. Additionally, her standpoint rega

E) Focusing On The Work

Salt Lake Tribune, 2/4/17, "ACLU Has Never Been More Needed, And Utahns Know It":

"The staff of the ACLU, at the national level and in each state, are rising to the challenge presented by each new civil liberties threat as it occurs. The pace is exhausting, but we are determined...The ACLU of Utah remains deeply engaged in a years-long battle to bring reform to Utah's public defender system. Substantive denial of legal counsel has been the status quo for far too long in our state, and we are committed to changing that.

In partnership with Racially Just Utah and others, we have fought to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, so that students of color are not be pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system. We have worked with prisoner rights groups and the Department of Corrections to slowly reduce and reorient the use of solitary confinement in state correctional facilities."

Why It Works: The article lays the groundwork for the ACLU of Utah's grassroots activism. It also highlights a number of different places that the organization focuses on giving readers a better understanding of some of their campaigns.

How To Write A Letter To The Editor (LTE)

What is a LTE?

A letter to the editor (LTE) is a response to an article or column posted in a magazine. An LTE can come from various sources, private citizens, activists, other journalists, or experts in the issues discussed in the original article. However, LTE's are often most effective when they are crafted by those who have a unique perspective or breadth of knowledge about the subject expressed in the original article. Though LTE's are often take the opposing side of the narrative presented in the original article, they can also be spaces to reaffirm an piece of writing that supports your viewpoint *and* add more context to the position presented.

Dos & Don'ts of the LTE

Do keep it brief. An LTE (unless particularly special circumstances) should be no more than 2 to 3 paragraphs. Anything longer than that should be craft into an op-ed.

Do get to the point quickly. Because LTE's rely on brevity, there is no room for introductions or declarations of who you are.

Do cite the article and author you are responding to in your LTE. Remember to address the author and the content head on, do not beat around the bush.

Remember your tone. What is the general voice of the letter? Humorous? Sardonic? Serious? Whatever tone you decide to write in, make sure that it is consistent.

Do get specific. Use your LTE to highlight specifically problematic language or issues.

Do use facts. While an LTE is a personal response, it is always more potent when quantitative data is included.

Don't insult. It is easy to insult an article or author in an LTE. However, it is more effective (and your work is more likely to be chosen) if you provide a cogent and respectful response.

Do be creative. Use the space you have thoughtfully. Figure out the best way to make your argument while standing out from the dozens of other LTEs.

Do use universal language. Writing an op-ed is not the same as writing an academic paper. Most newspaper articles are written on an 8th grade reading level. Attempt to take very high brow concepts and make them palatable and understandable to all audiences.