Writing: Op-Eds

Providing Opinions That Matter

Turning Academic Publications into Perspectives for the General Public

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My Background

• Jerry McKinstry
  – Former reporter, columnist and editor for The Journal News and Newsday.
  – Was a member of Newsday’s Editorial Board that was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.
  – Commentator with News12 & FIOS 1 News.
  – Former Deputy Communications Director for Westchester County.
  – Ran media on political campaigns.
  – Currently runs all media efforts for Pace University in Westchester.
How do you get press?

Two main ways:

• Ride the news wave – contribute to the stories reporters and editors are already interested in by being an expert in that subject area.

• Create the news wave – convince reporters or editors to write a story they weren’t planning on writing.
How to ride the news wave:

• Find a breaking/developing news story you have expertise in.
• Be available and responsive.
• Quick quote to share your perspective pushed out to reporters and news desks.
• Respond to inbound requests for experts.
• Maximize social platforms (LinkedIn, Twitter); post POVs, comment on/RT reporter posts
• Submit an op-ed on the topic.
What is an Op-Ed?

• Op(posite)-Ed(itorial) Page ...
• Originally created for opposing opinions
• Provide equal time and space for opinions that contrast with views of Editorial Board
• Respond to current topics in the news
• Provide insight-opinions of experts in a field
  – Health
  – Politics
  – International Affairs
  – Environment
What is an Op-Ed? ... cont.

• "Anything can be an Op-Ed.” -- Trish Hall, the former Op-Ed and Sunday Review editor for NYT.

• Personal or explanatory essays, commentary on news events, reflections on cultural trends and more are all welcome.
Characteristics of an Op-Ed?

• It is short: typically between 600 and 800 words.
• Has a clearly defined point of view or opinion
• It contains the strong, unique voice of the writer.
• Opinion is strong, and any criticisms are fair
• Must be well-written with a fact-based viewpoint.
• (Having an opinion isn’t enough ... you must back it up with facts, examples & anecdotes.)
• Use your research
Characteristics of an Op-ed

• Topical & Timely
• Theme is relevant, interesting
• Bolder is better
• Tells a story (preferably with people; numbers can support argument)
• Provides unique insight into an issue
• General or obvious opinions likely won’t get picked up
What makes a good op-ed?

- Should offer a fresh perspective or analysis of the issue.
- Don’t equivocate
  - Be Bold
  - Don’t be soft
  - Don’t take opposing positions
  - Don’t contradict yourself
- Must be timely – news changes within hours.
- But simultaneously should pass the test of time.
What else makes a good op-ed?

- **Loose formula:**
  - Set it up - the news topic / issue you’re writing about
  - Knock it down – explain what’s wrong or a different perspective
  - Replace it – either a better understanding or a better way of doing something
  - Ask yourself: Would I read this? Why should anyone else?
Tools

– Your research
– Interesting anecdotes and real life examples
– Facts, data, stats and information
– Quotes ... sources (can complement the data and drive home the message)
The Challenge

• Academic articles typically aren’t meant for the general public. Op-Eds typically are.
• Academic articles often result from years of study. Findings may not coincide for media or public’s appetite for topic.
• Academic articles are typically much longer. Op-eds can be anywhere from 500-1,200 words (usually somewhere in between, depending on publication).
The Solution

• Find a news hook; something that ties into a news topic, current trend and something in the public eye.
• Make a compelling argument for why people should be interested in the topic.
• Be forward looking.
• Edit, re-write, and target a general audience.
• Write a piece as if you were explaining to a student and layperson who knows little about the topic.
• Think of an op-ed as an educational opportunity. It’s a virtual lesson.
Some basics

• Every sentence should have a point
• Every sentence should advance the argument or story.
• The more complex the concept, the simpler the language.
• Don’t take on too big a topic: Narrow focus, if necessary.
• End should tie back to the beginning.
Targeting a Publication, Then Submitting

• Target outlet informs the piece – if target is the Journal News, then tie to the area.
• If the WSJ, must be national or international, and have business angle.
• New York Times is the Holy Grail, and very competitive.
• KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE
• You can submit to only one news outlet at a time; this can sometimes mean losing precious days, so best to be realistic.
• Some outlets are more responsive than others.
Questions???