

Op-Ed Guidelines

Printed opposite the editorial page, as the name suggests, op-ed articles are an excellent way to express interesting opinions and perspectives on matters in the news. Well written articles reflect well on both the author and the University. For the New York Times and other national newspapers, competition for getting an op-ed published is stiff; other media are more welcoming. For all, it is important to keep op-ed articles short, between 500 and 750 words. Letters to the editor are generally limited to 150 words. Generally, topics and relevance (global, national, local) depend on the newspaper.

Plan with the Media Relations office. If you have an idea, it is usually best to have a quick conference. The office can help you strategize before you start writing and can help edit once you have a draft. Sometimes the staff may call you to propose an idea. Staff members have spent years cultivating professional relationships with members of the media and are able to base evaluations of ideas on their knowledge of the interests of the media and other constituencies. They edit following news guidelines in order to ease the job of editors at the other end, which increases the possibility that articles will be used.

Op-ed Articles should be approximately 700 words long. Requirements vary by publication, but 700 words is the maximum for the *New York Times*. *Newsday* and some other papers will accept pieces up to 900 words. "My Turn" in *Newsweek* runs 1200-1500 words. Letters to the editor generally should be no more than 150 words.

Articles should be topical and, above all, timely. They should be related to an event or trend in the news and submitted while the subject is still in the headlines. Timing is absolutely critical. It is just too late once the news in the daily paper has moved on to another topic, regular columnists have sounded off, or other op-eds have appeared. Noel Rubinton, the op-ed editor of *Newsday*, has flatly said: "An adequate piece on the right day is better than the perfect piece three weeks late." Some op-ed pieces are written to appear a day or two *before* a forthcoming event or legislative development when that can be predicted.

Articles should be contentious. They should dispute misinformation or a bad paradigm and propose better. These are opinion pieces and need a point of view early in their sequence. Passion pays.

As another editor once phrased it, one loose formula is:

1. Set it up (an erroneous idea in the news).
2. Knock it down (say what's wrong).
3. Replace it (with a better understanding).

Articles should state their viewpoint early. This is in contrast to the way many professors teach, presenting facts first and summarizing or interpreting later. In an op-ed, the opinion usually is stated at the beginning and then the significance.

The viewpoint should be fresh. It should present readers with facts and opinions that are counterintuitive and/or go beyond those that readers may have seen already in news columns or op-eds.

Write from an informed gut. Many op-eds start with a gut reaction to something in the day's news. You read something at breakfast and get mad. The best ones often are done quickly, turned out overnight or in an hour or so while the topic and the writer are hot, without days of tinkering. This does not mean op-eds are casually tossed off: they draw on (and of course showcase) a career's worth of accumulated learning and expertise.

Scholarly work can be adapted. Sometimes a piece can be partially written by adapting from or excerpting a current scholarly work.

Articles should be polished. Most publications want mastery of the subject, expertise, and clarity of thought more than elegant prose. Especially if a piece is fresh and topical, editors often will edit and polish, getting your approval of changes.

Articles should have statistics. They should not overwhelm the piece but are always welcome.

Articles are a way to publicize recent projects. The brief author's biography at the end of the piece often can be used to publicize a current or forthcoming book or project.

There should be a local connection. For all papers except the *Times*, and sometimes even there, papers like to feature authors with local connections and expertise. For *The Journal News* in Westchester, for example, people connected with Westchester County have an extra edge because the paper's mission is to cover the county (including its thinkers), and because on local issues, Westchester experts are likely to be better informed than outsiders.

Imagine and write for a target audience. Your target may be readers of a national newspaper like the *New York Times* or *Los Angeles Times*, readers of a regional one like *The Journal News*, of a "thought" magazine like *The Nation* or *The National Review*, of a specialized publication like *Forbes* or *Rolling Stone* or *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, or of a professional newsletter. It is essential to refresh your sense of what the publication likes by looking at one or two recent issues.

All subjects welcome. Most op-ed pages are wide open on subject matter and political point of view. If a publication has its own "tilt," the editors usually welcome dissenting viewpoints.

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