USE YOUR VOICE TO SHAPE THE FUTURE

Writing an Op-Ed

Writing an op-ed in your school paper or other print mediums can be an effective way of making a case for the importance of financial aid funding and sharing your story. An article can reach millions of readers, swaying hearts and changing minds. It can help reshape a public debate and affect policy.

WA-SEN aims to help you elevate and amplify your voice through different means. We shared these guidelines prepared by David Jarmul at Duke University, to help you get started:

Track the news and jump at opportunities.

Timing is essential. When an issue is dominating the news – whether it's a war, a stock market panic or just the latest controversy on a reality television show – that's what readers want to read and op-ed editors want to publish. Whenever possible, therefore, link your issue explicitly to something happening in the news. If you're a researcher studying cancer, for instance, start off by discussing the celebrity who died yesterday. Or, look ahead to a holiday or anniversary a week from now that will provide a fresh news peg (and enable editors to plan the story in advance).

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 The Quarterly Journal of Economics. 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.

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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 North Carolina safeguard its environment, or the White House change its foreign policy? 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.

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

Use short sentences and paragraphs.

Look at some op-ed articles 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. Cut long paragraphs into two or more shorter ones.

Don't be afraid of the personal voice.

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 on Research Drive last month." When it comes to op-eds, however, it's good to use the personal voice whenever possible. If you are a physician, describe the plight of one of your patients. If you've worked with poor families in the area, tell their stories to help argue your point.

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.

Don't write: "It is hoped that [or: One would hope that} the government will . . ." Instead, say "I hope the government will . . ." 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.

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.

Source: The WA-SEN Guidebook, available from wa-sen.org

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Acknowledge the other side.

People writing op-ed articles sometimes make the mistake of piling on one reason after another why they're right and their opponents are wrong, if not idiots. They'd probably appear more credible, and almost certainly more humble and appealing, if they took a moment to acknowledge the ways in which their opponents are right. When you see experienced op-ed authors saying "to be sure," that's what they're doing.

Make your ending a winner.

You're probably familiar with the importance of a strong opening paragraph, or "lead," that hooks readers. But when writing for the op-ed page, it's also important to summarize your argument in a strong final paragraph. 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 Kierkegaard.

How to submit an article.

The best way to submit an op-ed article is either by reaching out to your student newspaper on campus, your local paper's editorial board via email, or by connecting with local news outlets. If you do choose to submit an article, be sure to include your contact information, and say whether you have a photo of yourself available. Most papers accept articles by email.

Where to submit the article.

Your best shot is to submit to your student newspaper at your college or to regional newspapers (especially at local papers, which almost always give preference to writers from the local area).

Courtesy of Carleton College with light editing by WA-SEN,
https://apps.carleton.edu/media_relations/about/op_ed_guidelines/