

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING AN OPINION EDITORIAL

An op-ed is an opinion essay written by a staff columnist or an outside contributor that presents the writer's opinion or thoughts about an issue. It should have a clear point of view or argument, supported by specific facts and evidence. Personal or explanatory essays, commentary on news events, and reflections on trends are all appropriate for opinion editorials.

While this is an opinion piece, it's important to remember that you are telling a story. Include personal stories and experiences, or the story of a patient in your care. The language needs to be relatable and accessible to the average reader. You are writing for a newspaper audience, not a medical or academic journal. Avoid using technical terms or professional jargon. Writing an opinion piece that is relevant and understandable not only makes it more interesting and persuasive to your reader, but also much more likely that a newspaper will publish it. As a physician or medical trainee, your identity and voice is particularly effective.

Basic Op-Ed Format

Lead paragraph: Try to grab readers right away with your first sentence; make them want to read more. Start with an interesting story or example, like an experience you had with a particular patient, an experience you've had as part of your clinical practice that encapsulates your point. Be sure to de-identify individual patients, and excluding story components that could identify a patient, even if they were not named.

Supporting paragraphs: Now that you've stated your point and grabbed readers' attention, build on your lede with facts, statistics, and anecdotes. In the first few paragraphs, tie your story or example from the lead paragraph to your thesis or the main point you're trying to convey. Supporting paragraphs may also tie together and link to the lead paragraph via a symbol, allegory, or metaphor that is woven throughout (for example, discussing how the current healthcare system is like bailing water out of a hole in the beach - sometimes tides are high, sometimes tides are low, but the hole is always refilled...etc.). Be sure to include a "nut graph" sentence that crystallizes your opinion and call to action early in your piece.

Wrap it up: Make the final sentence as compelling as the first one. If you started with an example, bring the story full circle by referencing your original point. Leave readers with information about what needs to be done next.

Tips for a Successful Op-Ed

Track the news and jump at opportunities. Timing is essential. When an issue is dominating the news, that's what readers want to read and op-ed editors want to publish. Whenever possible, link your issue explicitly to something happening in the news. If you're a physician advocating for lower cost medicine, for instance, then start off by discussing the latest controversial bill or the outrageous drug price hikes. Reference particular stories recently in the news - about a patient like ones you see, or a story quoting a CEO of a big pharmaceutical company who just raised drug prices, or policy makers failing to deliver on promises.

Different newspapers and websites have different guidelines, but, in general, the upper limit of an op-ed is 750 words—and shorter is often better. Keep your essay short and make your point clearly and persuasive. Some academic authors feel like they need more room to explain their argument, but unfortunately, newspapers have strict length guidelines and editors generally won't take the time to cut a long article down to size.

Keep it short and simple. State the opinion clearly and quickly, backed up with *one or two* facts and examples that bring your arguments to life. We are more likely to remember emotional details than dry facts. Opening sentences should grab the reader's attention with a strong claim, a surprising fact, or a metaphor that entices the reader into reading more. Follow the same style throughout the piece. Cut long paragraphs into two or more shorter ones.

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. In an opinion piece, offer specific recommendations (e.g. Congress and the White House should do reign in abuse of the patent monopoly system to make drugs more affordable and accessible). Do more than call for "more research" or merely suggesting that opposing parties work out their differences.

Additionally, tell readers why they should care (e.g. “This policy ensures that diabetic patients get access to the insulin they need to live healthy lives”). Appeals to self-interest usually are more effective than abstract punditry.

Be informal and embrace your personal voice. Unlike professional journals, op-eds are written in first person, and should feature your own voice. If you’re a physician, you can describe the struggles of a patient, or working with underserved families, and how that made them feel personally. In so doing, words will ring truer and the reader will care more. Feel free to speak from multiple identities—for example, talking about experiences as both a physician, and as a patient.

Use your identity physician, medical student, or other health professional. Physicians are among the most trusted members of their communities, as are nurses and other “white coat” health care professionals. Medical students sometimes have even more credibility; even with less experience, they are often viewed as “pure of heart” with selfless motives and free of conflict. Explicitly state your identity and what you bring with it: an ability to relate to the people in the community, particular stories of patients and families who have been in your care, the training, the moral and emotional weight and responsibility, an ability to bring data and helpful information, or an ability to know what is best clinical practice for patients (and, likewise, what is not—such as medications that you want to prescribe but you know your patients cannot afford).

Promote personal connections to readers. Op-ed editors at local/regional papers prefer authors who live locally or have local connections. If you’re submitting an article to your local paper, this will work in your favor. If you’re submitting it in a city where you once lived or worked, be sure to mention this in your cover note and byline. You may also seek a local friend or colleague to co-sign. If you’re writing for a publication that serves a particular profession, ethnic group or other cohort, let them know how you connect personally. Finally, if you do not live locally, but are directly tying your story to a news report related to their local area or state, make that explicit.

Avoid jargon. If a technical detail is not essential to the argument, don’t use it. When in doubt, leave it out. Simple language doesn’t mean simple thinking; it means being considerate of readers who lack medical expertise. Details about a clinical condition or treatment or hospitalization should be included when relevant to your core thesis or metaphor—but you’ll need to include room to explain.

Use the active voice. Don't write: “It is hoped that the Senator will...” Instead, say “I urge Senator to take [a specific action].” Active voice is nearly always better than passive voice. It’s easier to read, and it leaves no doubt about who is doing the urging, recommending or other action.

Acknowledge the other side. People writing op-ed articles sometimes make the mistake of failing to acknowledge, and then refute the arguments of the opposition. We are more credible, and almost certainly more humble and appealing, if we take a moment to acknowledge a way in which an opponents may have an appealing argument—but **then correct the record about the biased assumptions and false claims.**

Make your ending a winner. As noted, a strong opening paragraph, or “lead,” to hook readers. 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 and then read the final paragraph and byline. This example responds to opposition and closes the argument:

“Pharmaceutical corporations win support by claiming they need high prices to fund research. My patients and I are thankful for investments in new cancer treatments--thankful to the U.S. taxpayers, who funded the bulk of underlying and even much of late-state research that went into the million dollar meds coming online. There is no justification for pricing a drug out of reach that the public paid to invent. Meanwhile, real drug company R&D is eclipsed by industry advertising, lobbying, executive compensation and stock buy-backs. My patients need the Senator to remove her hold on the We PAID Act.”

Comprehensive set of tips, op-ed guidelines and submission links for many mainstream newspapers and online journals: <https://www.theopedproject.org/>

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