How to Write and Place an Op-Ed

Op-ed is newspaper shorthand for “opposite the editorial” because traditionally, opinion pieces have been printed on the page opposite the newspaper’s editorials. Op-eds are not news pieces, they are the writer’s opinion, usually on a timely topic and in an area where the writer has expertise or special knowledge. If you have an interesting opinion to share and can express it clearly and persuasively in about 750 words, you may reach millions of people, change minds, and perhaps even reshape public policy. Keep in mind that timeliness is everything in the news business so try to capitalize on what’s happening in the world—or your state or town—right now.

• **Have a news hook**
  News outlets are much more likely to accept a piece about a topic that’s in the news. Readers want your perspective on something they’re already reading about, so try to tie your topic to something already in the public eye.

• **Tailor your op-ed to the news outlet’s audience**
  If you’re submitting to a local newspaper, they’re typically looking for op-eds that are relevant to their community, so include local influences on or consequences of the issue. You can also emphasize your personal connections—many op-ed editors prefer authors who live locally or who have other local connections.

• **Consider a range of outlets and read the publications you want to write for**
  We all want to be published in The New York Times, but consider a range of outlets and get familiar with where you’ll submit your op-ed. Outlets like Psychology Today and HuffPost are always looking for content. Local or regional newspapers are also looking for diverse voices. Read the outlet to which you’re submitting to get a sense of its style, voice and tone. Most newspapers have op-ed word limits of around 750 words, so you’ll have to be concise.

• **Write simply and don’t use jargon**
  Make your points clearly and concisely. Use short sentences and paragraphs. Think about how you would talk to your parents, grandparents or next-door neighbor. Ask a nonacademic friend to critique your draft and make sure it is free of confusing language, abbreviations or unfamiliar terms.

• **Lead with your main point**
  In academia, scientists lay out the groundwork that supports their ideas before they articulate their conclusions. But in an op-ed, that order is reversed. Start with your key point and then unpack it for readers. You have to grab readers’ attention from the get-go and convince them that you have something interesting to say.
• **Three points are usually the limit**
  Considering the amount of space you have, don’t try to pack in too much. By limiting the points you are trying to make, you will increase the likelihood that your work will be used because your writing will be tighter.

• **Finish strong**
  In addition to having a strong opening paragraph to hook readers, it’s important to summarize your argument in a powerful final paragraph. That’s because many casual readers scan the headline, skim the opening, and then read the final paragraph and byline.

• **Don’t sweat the headline**
  The newspaper will write its own headline based on space available. You can suggest one, but don’t spend a lot of time worrying about it.

• **Tell stories and go light on the data**
  Statistics are OK in moderation, but stories capture readers’ attention—most of us remember narratives and colorful details better than numbers. Bring your examples to life. Include details—what something smelled like, looked like, felt like. Embrace personal experiences. Use the active voice. (Not “Mistakes happened,” but “I made mistakes.”) And remember: You’re not writing an academic article.

• **Tell readers why they should care.**
  **Offer specific recommendations/solutions**
  Put yourself in the place of the busy person looking at your article. Ask aloud: “So what? Who cares?” You need to answer these questions. If you describe a problem, propose a solution. Don’t be satisfied with analysis. How should your town help those in deep poverty? How can we solve the problem of racism?

• **Make it exclusive**
  Don’t submit your op-ed to multiple outlets simultaneously, thinking that this will increase your chances of getting it published. Most newspapers and magazines insist on exclusivity. If you don’t hear back from an editor within a week of submitting, follow up with an email asking if a decision has been made because you’d like to submit the piece elsewhere. And don’t get discouraged—it’s not unusual to have to submit to more than one outlet.

• **How to submit an article**
  Almost all outlets post guidelines about how they prefer to receive op-ed submissions. In general, they provide an email address where you can submit the article electronically, but check first. Always be sure to include your contact information, and say whether you have a head shot of yourself available (and to which you have the rights).

• **Don’t give up after the first try**
  If you have not heard back in three-five days, it’s OK to email the outlet to find out if they are passing or still considering publication. If that does not elicit an answer, let them know that you plan to submit the piece elsewhere – and then do so. It is not uncommon to have to submit a piece to several outlets before one accepts it. Keep in mind that most major newspapers and magazines receive hundreds of submissions.

• **Make your voice heard**
  If your op-ed is published, share it on social media. Consider sending a copy to your legislator and/or other affected parties in your state or town.

**RESOURCES**
The Op-Ed Project has an excellent, interactive list of news outlets that accept op-eds.
www.theopedproject.org/submission-information
It also provides other tips on how to pitch op-eds, FAQs, seminars and even a mentor-editor program.