



HOW TO WRITE A COMPELLING OPED

OpEds can be an exciting and useful tool for sharing your research and opinions outside of the academy. But the market for OpEds can also be very competitive, so it's important to keep a few key things in mind as you begin writing your piece.

ELEMENTS TO CONSIDER

Purpose – What do you hope to accomplish with the OpEd? Every OpEd can inform the public about an important issue, but it is crucial to think about how your piece could affect change. Are you hoping to inform or influence a particular policymaker or legislation? Do you want to reframe a narrative in the media? Consider your goal for the piece before you begin writing.

Target Audience – Once you've identified a clear goal, consider who needs to read your OpEd in order for you to accomplish your goal. The more specific you can get, the better. "The general public" is too vague and makes your OpEd less useful. When you have your target audience selected, tailor your piece to that audience and identify news outlets that might reach them.

Key Message – Your OpEd should convey a clear opinion on a topic to your audience. Given the limited space in an OpEd, boil this opinion down to a single, key message that you will support with evidence throughout the piece. Make sure you can write your key message in one or two sentences – otherwise it is too complex.

Timely Hook – Your key message will be all the more compelling if you have a timely hook at the start of your OpEd to grab the reader's attention. A convincing hook explains why readers should care and read further, and why this issue is relevant now. Common news hooks are current events, anniversaries of major events, and holidays. Be cautious of hooks that are too broad or overused. Be creative – sometimes less obvious or counterintuitive connections are the most powerful.

Vivid Stories – One of the best ways to persuade your audience is to show more than you tell. The strongest OpEds include interesting stories to make their point. Draw on personal experiences, recount compelling examples from your research, or retell a story from the news to give the readers some context. Don't be afraid to use the first-person. Remember that even the most interesting statistic can't compete with a vivid story.

Unique Perspective – What can you bring to the table that others can't? The OpEd market is crowded, so consider what sets your piece apart. For researchers, that will most likely mean drawing on your studies to provide novel insights on current events. Make sure your piece does not repeat arguments already being made by others, especially in the outlets you are planning to pitch.

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Credibility – In addition to showcasing a unique perspective on a topic, consider how you can signal your credibility on this subject aside from your institutional affiliation. Were you the first to discover something? Were you involved in a major research project? Did you write a book on this topic? Have you studied the particular issue in the news right now? Outside of your research, personal connections to the topic at hand, such as personal identities or lived experiences, can lend credibility as well. Signal your credibility either in the OpEd itself or in the pitch email to the editor.

GENERAL OPED TIPS

OpEds are meant for a non-academic audience so avoid jargon, acronyms, phrases that only specialists understand, and overly dense writing. Many outlets look for pieces written at an 8th grade reading level or below. Remember that OpEds are less formal than academic writing. Break up overly complex sentences and include particularly short sentences for added emphasis. Don't be afraid to break traditional rules of grammar, such as starting a sentence with "And" or "But".

In addition to shorter sentences, OpEds typically have short paragraphs that include no more than 3 or 4 sentences. Varying your paragraph length will also make your piece more dynamic. You can even pull out particularly powerful sentences into their own paragraphs.

When it comes to citing information, OpEds don't use footnotes or in-text citations. Instead, embed hyperlinks as needed in the piece. Be sure that the majority of your links go to publicly accessible information, such as news articles or government reports, not academic journals or other content hidden behind paywalls. These links are meant for readers who want to learn more.

Editors are looking for pieces that abide by their outlet's length and format rules and speak to their readers in an appropriate style. Find your target publication's requirements, usually stated on its website, and write with its audience and style in mind. Keep in mind that most outlets require pieces to be under 750 words, so be prepared to write a short piece and keep your piece focused.

TYPICAL OPED STRUCTURE

OpEds can be written in a lot of different ways, but many pieces follow a similar structure. Regardless of the order, compelling OpEds typically include these main components.

Hook/Intro – Start by grabbing the reader's attention and signaling why you wrote this piece now.

Key Message – Introduce your key message towards the beginning of the piece. A reader should know within the first 30 seconds of reading your piece what your main argument is.

Supporting Evidence – Bring in stories, statistics, and other information to support your argument.

Response to Critics – In one paragraph towards the end of the piece, consider what the other side might argue or some of the downsides of your argument and respond to them.

Next Steps and Solutions – End your piece by telling the reader what should happen next or what policy solutions you recommend. Tie this back to your hook if you possible.

Bio – Write a short 1-2 sentence bio that highlights your expertise on this subject.

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