



Advocacy Education Series: Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor

Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor are short articles in a newspaper's Editorial section written by concerned and involved citizens to express an opinion or viewpoint to the general public. An Op-Ed is a stand-alone opinion piece, while a Letter to the Editor is generally a response to a previous article printed in the paper. Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor can be extremely useful tools for advocates trying to change public opinion and/or spread awareness of a key issue. While getting published in a large newspaper can be difficult, many smaller papers are always eager to accept an Op-ed or Letter to the Editor.

Preparing to Write

- **Choose your message** (just one), then plan carefully what you want to say and how you want to say it. Make it readable, understandable, and concise.
- **Identify your target audience.** If you're trying to reach the general public, choose the paper with the largest circulation. If you're targeting a specific lawmaker, choose their hometown paper or a paper that you know they read.
- **Research the newspaper** to which you are submitting your piece to see what kind of issues they generally include and the typical writing style of the published writers. Find out about their submission guidelines, timelines, and other policies, either online or by contacting the paper. Be sure to ask if the paper has an exclusivity policy (some papers will not publish an article that is being submitted to other papers) or any other policies such as needing to change the names of real people used as examples in the article, if more than one author can sign the article, etc.

Writing the Article

- **Be clear and concise.** Keep your sentences short, use accessible language, and don't try to make too many arguments. Get right to the subject and do not exceed the word limit.
- **Be direct.** Avoid sarcasm, hyperbole, and hypothetical questions. You don't want readers guessing what the point is that you are trying to make.
- **Be personal.** Real life stories are engaging and can make a point quickly and effectively.
- **Be careful.** Don't offend or personally attack anyone. Avoid adding anything that will detract from your article or distract readers from your main point.

- **Be honest.** If you have a vested interest in the issue, be up front about it.
- **Be actionable.** If you are urging the public to take action, let them know exactly what it is they can do and how they need to go about doing it.
- **Be right and prove wrong, if possible.** It can be extremely effective to disprove your opponent's viewpoint or stance. If you can, do it. Be sure to use and cite your data to establish credibility. Include links to primary sources if possible. If you can't, *do not bring it up.*
- **Include your name and information on how you can be reached.** If you are writing on behalf of an organization, include the name and a one sentence description of the mission of that organization.

Submitting the Article

- **Read and re-read your piece.** Double and triple check your facts. Have someone else read your article to check for readability, understanding, and errors.
- **Submit the article** in exactly the manner that the paper requested.
- **Follow-Up.** After a day or so, call the paper and ask if they received your article and if the proper person is in possession of it. If there is a timing issue tied to your article (an upcoming vote, event, etc.) be sure to let them know.
- **Be persistent.** The paper will contact you prior to publication. If you don't hear anything after a few days, call them and ask if you need to provide any additional information or if there is anything else you can do to help.
- **Accept changes.** The paper may want to make some slight changes to your article with your approval. Not the content, but perhaps wording, structure, length, etc.
- **Try again.** If for some reason your article didn't get published, find out why. Don't get discouraged, papers receive many submissions and certainly can't print them all.
- **Save it.** If your article is published, request a few copies to keep for your records and also to send directly to certain folks you are trying to reach, such as legislators or other policymakers.

Find more advice on writing op-eds at The OpEd Project: www.theopedproject.org.