



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.

- Most policymakers read these newspaper items regularly. Reading these items is one of the main ways that elected officials track issues of importance and constituent sentiment.
- It is a free and relatively simple way to address a large portion of the general public.
- They are your exact words, your exact message. There is no chance that a reporter will misquote you, miss your point, or come up with his or her own slant for the piece.
- If your opposition wants to respond, they need to write and submit their own piece.
- It is an excellent way to address and explain a complex issue that may not be getting traction elsewhere.
- If your issue is not getting any press, an article written by you can revive it in the public's eye.
- 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.
- An elected official who is passionate about your issue may agree to put his or her name on the article you wrote. This is a win-win for all. An official is saying *exactly* what you want him to say and you get the additional visibility of your issue being addressed by an official. The official gets publicity on an issue they care deeply about and can connect directly with his or her voters. Just keep the fact that you wrote it between you and the official!



How-To's

- **Message.** Choose your message (just one), then plan carefully and thoroughly what you want to say and how you want to say it. Don't try to cram too much information in; make it readable, understandable, and clear as day.
- **Target.** Who is it that you are trying to reach? Is it the general public? Then choose the paper with the largest circulation. Is it a specific policymaker? Choose his or her hometown paper or a paper that you *know* he or she reads.
- **Research.** Read the paper to which you are submitting your piece. What kind of issues do they generally include? What is the writing style? Etc.
- **Contact.** Ask the paper what their various policies are, including:
 - How do they take submissions? E-mail, fax, hardcopy, etc.
 - What is the turnaround time? When should you submit your article and how long will it take until it's published?
 - How long can the piece be? Stick to their number!
 - Exclusivity? Some papers WILL NOT publish an article that is being submitted to other papers. Find out up front and follow their rules! If you don't, they will be unlikely to publish your articles in the future.
 - Other policies. Be sure to ask if they have any other policies such as needing to change the names of real people used as examples in the article, are more than one authors able to sign the article, etc.
- **Writing the Article**
 - **Be short.** Get right to the subject. When they give you a word limit, they 100% mean it. The most common reason for submissions not being published is exceeding the word limit.
 - **Be clear.** Big words and lots of statistics do not and will not impress the reader, you will only lose them. Keep it at an 8th grade level, keep your sentences short, and don't try to make too many arguments.
 - **Be direct.** Again, get right to the subject and stick to it. Sarcasm, hyperbole, and hypothetical questions don't translate well into print and generally confuse readers. Don't use them in your article, you don't want readers guessing what the point is that you are trying to make.

- **Be real.** Real life stories are what grasp readers and change opinions. Real life stories are engaging and usually far better at making a point more quickly than anything else.
 - **Be careful.** Choose your words wisely. Don't offend anyone, don't personally attack anyone, and don't add anything that will detract from your article or distract your readers from understanding and retaining your main point.
 - **Be honest.** If you have a horse in the race or a stake in the claim, as they say, be up front and direct about 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. If you can't, DO NOT BRING IT UP.
 - **Be actionable.** If there is something that the general public can do or some way they can get involved, add actionable items into your article. 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.
 - **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.
- **Be patient.** Wait. Don't rush your article out the door the second you finish it. If possible, wait a few days to let your ideas and content simmer. You don't want to send it out and then say, *'I wish I had said it this way, or included this information, or I can't believe I forgot this!'*
 - **Be sure.** Double and triple check your facts. Read and re-read your article checking for grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. Yes, the paper has an editor, but making their life easier helps you in the long run. Make sure it's right the first time. Also, have a friend or colleague read over your article to check it for readability, understanding, errors, etc. Ask if they were engaged by the article.
 - **Send it in!** Submit your article in the exact format and manner the paper requested it. No exemptions. Again, a paper is more likely to be receptive to your articles if you follow their protocols. It may seem like a non-issue for you, but they ask for articles to be submitted a certain way for a reason. Don't make their jobs harder.

- **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 NOW
- **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. Don't be a pest, but be firm.
- **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. Don't take it personally, it's what editors do. And they are generally right.
- **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. Keep at it and you will get an article published. If you do everything right, build a relationship with the staff, and get a reputation of being easy to work with, the paper will look forward to receiving your submissions!
- **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, bureaucrats, other policymakers, etc.