

Successful LTE/Opposite Editorial (OP-ED's)

~~Physicians for Social Responsibility PSR.org~~

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Why write an opinion piece?

The opinion page is one of the best-read sections of any publication. The most attentive readers are decision makers in government, corporations, and nonprofit institutions. The opinion pages are one of the best ways for the nonprofessional writer to place an issue in the public eye, or to bring his or her perspective to the news.

In general, editors want pieces that do not just display expertise; they want pieces that are well written, timely and provocative—all the hallmarks of any good nonfiction writing. A good piece is concise and hits hard. It marshals vivid images. Three basic kinds of items appear in opinion pages: editorials, written by newspaper staff; letters to the editor, written by readers; and op-eds (OPposite the EDitorials on the page), generally written by people with special expertise or credibility in a certain field.

Print vs. electronic: The writing guidelines are the same in any medium. The booming (and less rarefied) world of electronic media includes blogs, extended web editions of newspapers or broadcast outfits such as the [Financial Times](#) or [CNN](#), and purely web-based news/opinion operations such as the [Huffington Post](#), [The Daily Beast](#), [Political.com](#) and [Slate.com](#). These are worth checking out. One of the many current guides is the book [An Introduction to Writing for Electronic Media](#). But things change fast on the web; the sites themselves are the best direct sources on how to get in.

Tips for a successful Letter to the Editor

Letters to the editor are the briefest option. Generally, they comment on news of the last few days. Large papers may receive hundreds per day, and print only a dozen. Still, if you have special credentials—and can speak pointedly-- you have a chance of getting in.

ABC's

About—usually in reference to a recent article, editorial or event. Citing the article and date is helpful but doesn't always have to be in the text of the LTE.

Be Brief: 100-250 words max.

Concise-catch attention with a personal (your health voice) or local slant if it's about a national or foreign policy issue. Stay only on one topic. It's ok to cite position of local politician to applaud or castigate.

Construct your LTE:

1. State the issue.

- Refer to the issue as reported in the newspaper, then say why you agree or disagree.

= OR =

- State the issue as you understand it: “Climate change is happening, it’s happening now, and it’s hurting our community.” “Climate change is not just about polar bears any more. It’s harming our children’s health.”

2. Build your case

- Say your piece in your own voice. Be yourself, be authoritative.
 - As a health professional, as a member of Physicians for Social Responsibility or AMSA, you have an identity and experience that convey authority. Make them audible.
 - *Your* words, *your* expertise, *your* experience.
 - “In my 14 years of nursing experience, I have observed...”
 - “My patients’ health/my child’s health/my health is affected by climate change.”
 - “We need to transition to renewable energy. The solar panels on my roof...”
- While you stick to the facts, don’t be afraid to let your feelings be known too. If you’re terrified by climate change... if you’re worried sick for your patients, or for your kids or your grandkids, *say so*. People don’t remember facts. They do remember when you speak from your heart.

3. Call to action. We’re PSR. We inspire people to take action. So try to:

- Say what the reader can do. Be specific. Suggest an action with a big enough effect to actually reduce climate change: passing a piece of legislation... supporting the closure of a local coal-fired power plant... advancing the transition to clean, healthy, low-carbon energy.
- If a legislator or a corporation should take action, mention them. Use their full name.
- If your letter is published, send it to the target legislator or corporation with a brief cover note. This doubles your impact.

4. Submission: Look up instructions in your paper. Send an email with no attachment. Give your full name, title, full address, email and phone number, which won’t be printed. For a local paper you may follow up in 1w but larger papers won’t respond. A handy summary of the submission guidelines of the country’s top 100 papers can be found at bit.ly/cacVBi.

Op-eds get more space. They usually analyze current news too or offer a point of view that is not being covered. They are very competitive; big papers may receive dozens, even hundreds, of submissions a day.

Credentials: Are you the right person to write an op-ed or letter or should you get a co-author? Passion and strong opinion are prerequisites; but they are not enough. Your credibility is far higher if you have true expertise, either through your training and work, or through a telling

and powerful personal experience. This is one thing that often sets the op-ed writer apart from the letter writer. That said, even a letter signed by a person with a relevant title potentially (though not always) carries more credibility for the reader than one by someone who has written in randomly. The main thing is: you should be able to back up any point you make.

Timing: If the issue or a related subject has been in the news lately, or if you are responding to a particular article, then the background of your piece will be well laid out, and it will increase your chances of getting in. However, in some cases, something may be going on below the public radar that should be in the news pages, but has not yet reached them. So, sometimes an op-ed helps to break the news itself. Occasionally if your op-ed does not break new ground, you may be able to find something current to tie it to often called a “news hook”: a holiday, anniversary, election, upcoming conference, report, a vote in Congress, or pending action by local or state government.

Which Publication? Consider your readers before you do anything. Are you submitting to a national, general-interest publication? If not, narrow your scope to something that pertains to the readership of that publication. Do not write about oil rights in Alaska if you are sending your op-ed to Tennessee—unless you are addressing oil prices across the country. Editors of local and regional papers also look for community interest or a strong local angle, and unless there is considerable public debate already, will be less receptive to op-eds about national issues or broad ideas. In this case, you can try telling a local story, usually about a real person, family or group and how your issue affects them.

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Writing the piece: An op-ed is generally 500-750 words. It must unfold quickly. Focus on one issue or idea, briefly express your opinion in your opening paragraph and be clear and confirmed in your viewpoint. You may think about using a “LEDE” which is a captivating technique to draw in readers or a “news hook” which is something around which the topic might be pertinent including a News event, tell a dramatic anecdote, reference popular culture, use wit and irony to point out a contradiction, use an anniversary, cite a major new study or get personal. The following paragraphs should back your viewpoint with factual, researched, or first-hand information. A good op-ed is not just an opinion; it consists of fact put into well-informed context.

Be timely and controversial--but not outrageous. Personal, conversational, and humorous (when appropriate) writing is important to readability, and to capturing the reader’s attention. Make sure that you educate without preaching. Near the end, clearly restate your position and issue a call to action. If you are discussing a problem, then offer a solution or a better approach; this takes the reader beyond mere criticism. It’s important to take a position which is well-argued, original, or offering a new insight. Be persuasive; offer concrete examples, using metaphors, and stories with emotion. Avoid condemnation but acknowledge opposition while disagreeing

Try to include a catchy title for your op-ed that emphasizes your central message. This will help the editor grasp the idea quickly, and help sell the piece. (However, be prepared for the paper to write its own headline; they will rarely use the writer's. That's just the way it's done.)

Here are some specific devices to keep in mind as you write.

- Come down hard on one side of the argument, and never equivocate.
- Identify the counterargument, and refute it with facts.
- Emphasize active verbs; go easy on adjectives and adverbs.
- Avoid clichés.
- Avoid technical jargon and acronyms
- Try to grab the reader's attention in the first line. End with a strong or thought-provoking line.
- Use specific references and easy-to-understand data rather than abstraction.
- Anecdotes can sometimes help enhance understanding of an issue.
- Ideally, your topic will be timely, but at the same time have a long shelf life (i.e., the problem won't be solved in a month).

More pointers:

[And Now a Word From Op-Ed](#) New York Times, Feb, 1, 2004

[What We Talk About When We Talk About Editing](#) New York Times, July 31, 2005

[Op-Ed Articles: How to Write and Place Them](#) Duke University 2010

How to Vet It: All writers have editors. You can start by showing the piece to colleagues for their common-sense reaction. You can also contact your institution's news media staff; they are trained writers, and helping out with such pieces is part of the job. There is no guarantee that they can turn a junky screed into an influential masterpiece; but they can offer valuable suggestions and maybe some rewriting. (Don't expect them to be your ghostwriter.)

How to Submit: Check your newspaper for the public editor.

Nowadays, letters or op-eds should almost always be submitted by email. If you happen to know the opinion editor at a certain newspaper, or a friend who knows that editor, that rarely hurts; send it directly to him or her. Otherwise, see the list below.

Include a brief bio, along with your phone number, email address, and mailing address at the bottom. For an op-ed, use a succinct cover letter to establish why you are qualified to write this piece. Explain (very briefly!) why the issue is important and why readers would care.

In general, you should submit to one publication at a time. However, editors can take up to 10 days to accept or reject.