

BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

PLACING AN OP-ED

The op-ed began in 1970 when the *New York Times* introduced a new feature, which was called the op-ed page because it appeared directly *opposite* the *editorial* page. Today, in newspapers across the country, the op-ed page is a daily venue for occasional contributors, allowing them to elaborate on a political point and make social commentary. The premise is always the same—if you can make a point well, you do not have to be a journalist to see it in print. For nonprofit groups that lack the advertising budgets to buy access to top decision makers, the op-ed approach can be invaluable.

Editors usually have some very concrete requirements for selection. Timeliness is an important consideration. Even if your op-ed does not break new ground, you may be able to find a news hook: a holiday, an anniversary, an election, an upcoming conference, a report, a vote in Congress, or pending action by local or state government. Editors want opinion pages to be relevant to ongoing events. If properly crafted, your op-ed can help achieve this goal.

The author's byline can make a huge difference. Having the article signed by a local or national expert, your group's president, a member of the clergy, or a well-known politician could enhance its prospects of being printed.

WHAT EDITORS WANT

Editors also tend to look for the following:

- A provocative idea on any subject
- An opinion on a current issue that is controversial, unexpected, authoritative, or newsworthy
- A call to arms on a neglected subject
- Bite and wit on a current issue

With the above criteria in mind, you should pay attention to current events and look for an angle that is provocative and new. Op-ed pages rarely run announcements of events, status reports, or the blatant promotion of organizations or obscure causes. Most editors see this as a section for sharp opinion, advocacy, denunciations, controversy, and surprise.

Investigating Submission Requirements

Call the newspaper first to confirm the name of the editorial page or op-ed editor and to ask about criteria for submissions. Larger papers including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have recorded messages that explain how to submit an op-ed, as well as the process by which you will be notified if a submission has been accepted or declined.

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DETERMINE HOW TO SHORE-UP OR REITERATE THE CAMPAIGN MESSAGE

Some newspapers accept op-eds by fax—but ask first. You should also ask about the approval process. In most cases, the newspaper will call you to clarify some of the facts only when they have decided to print your piece.

Getting Started with Writing

The first step in writing an op-ed should be to determine how to shore-up or reiterate the campaign message.

In our case, the goal is established: **to increase public commitment and financial support for civil legal aid.**

The research has told us that in order to achieve that goal, **we must illustrate the currently invisible program and communicate widespread unmet need.**

Here are 10 helpful hints to consider when writing the op-ed:

1. Try to reduce your point to a single sentence. For example: “Every child deserves a family”; “The United Nations needs more funding”; “Women have achieved enormous strides in the past decade.” See if your sentence passes the “wow” test or the “hmm” test; if not, the point needs sharpening.
2. Any point worth making will have to be defended. Muster your best three or four supporting arguments, and state each one in a single paragraph. Be as specific as possible.
3. Avoid starting sentences with “There are.” Use the active voice rather than the passive voice.
4. Raise your opponents’ best arguments, and challenge them with countervailing facts, withering irony, condescension, or whatever is appropriate, but address them.
5. Ask yourself, what is the minimum background information a reader absolutely has to have in order to grasp this point? Write two paragraphs that summarize this information.
6. Imagine your target reader browsing through the newspaper on a workday morning, rushing to find something interesting. What kind of statement might catch this person’s attention? If you can raise questions, surprise, intrigue, or baffle your reader into getting past the first paragraph, you stand a chance the editor will let you put the entire op-ed in the paper.
7. Now, write the piece. Draft about a thousand words (four double-spaced pages) maximum. Restate your key points in the final paragraph.

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8. Cut out half a page. Eliminate repetition. Trim words, not ideas. Check every word and see what you can eliminate. Convert passive verbs to active ones. Give the piece to someone else and ask that person to review it. If rewriting or cutting is required, you want to do it yourself, rather than leave it to the discretion of the newspaper editor.
9. Your final piece should be no more than 750 words and hopefully less. 500 to 650 words is ideal. Do not forget to include your name, title, and affiliation at the end. Remember, whether this op-ed was intended as a single action or as the first phase of a multifaceted media campaign, you are on your way.
10. Submit the piece with a short cover letter that includes your name and phone number. You will be notified if your article is accepted for publication. Calling and badgering the op-ed staff may not help and could hurt you. Be patient. It can take weeks for even a time-sensitive op-ed to appear. Stay ready to update and revise in the hours before publication.

If your op-ed is rejected, revise it and try another publication. Or try again in a few weeks or months on another topic. Do not despair. Your piece may have arrived during a very busy week with lots of competition. Often it is just a matter of your op-ed's being in the right place at the right time.

If your piece is printed, make copies and send them to colleagues, elected officials, funders, reporters, and others who can help move your issue. This can be an excellent way of getting your exact message to key influentials and helping to frame the debate. An op-ed can serve as a springboard to talk show appearances, panel discussions, and countless other opportunities.

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