

YOUR ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

HOW TO WRITE AN OP-ED WITH DIGNITY

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“Good editorial writing has less to do with winning an argument, since the other side is mostly not listening, and more to do with telling the guys on your side how they ought to sound when they’re arguing.”

—Adam Gopnik, Staff Writer,
The New Yorker

In days of yore, an op-ed was an opinion column opposite the editorial page of a newspaper (opposite-editorial). Nowadays, an op-ed is understood to be an opinion piece having a sharp, single focus written in a clear, informed voice. While expressing the author’s point of view, an op-ed is more than mere opinion and it goes beyond a [letter to the editor](#).

In general, an op-ed is a studied opinion containing credibly sourced, well-organized information to represent a specific viewpoint. In other words, an op-ed presents a valid argument. Believe it or not, good opinion editors are always on the lookout for professionally written, clashing views.

An op-ed can be written for someone else to submit. With this approach, the op-ed should be written in a way to reflect that person’s voice. The best way to develop a piece of writing is to interview the “author” using the format in this tutorial and transcribe their answers, then edit the draft down to a crisply written piece.

WHY WRITE AN OP-ED?

A well-written opinion can shine a bright light into dark corners, making it possible for readers to consider new information or information restated in an accessible way. An op-ed that hits hard and fast with the right kind of information is a credible way to rally readers to a cause. The persuasive power of an editorial solidifies support for an issue and may sway those who are on the fence.



Photo by Glenn Carstens-Peters on Unsplash

As Adam Gopnik of *The New Yorker* points out, the opposition is mostly not listening, so an op-ed should target those who are listening and those who are likely to listen.

An effective op-ed can evoke reaction and response, compelling readers to get more involved (e.g., make donations, call lawmakers, contact businesses, or join movements). Public figures and organizations frequently experience an increase in constituent contacts following a published editorial. In short, a good op-ed has built-in ability to move people to action.

TRY ONE ON FOR SIZE

These published op-eds were selected for our tutorial because they clearly illustrate how few words are required to get a point across. Subject matter aside, these pieces are persuasive, packed with information, and offer food for thought as you consider your first draft:

- [*Volcanologist: Why Hawaii's volcano is in danger of going ballistic*](#), Einat Lev, CNN
- [*Collar the Cat!*](#), Abel John, one of nine high school winners in the Seventh Annual Student Editorial Contest, published by New York Times.

Read/Browse:

- [*How to Write an Op-Ed Article*](#), David Jarmul, Duke University Associate VP for News and Communications
- [*Writing and Submitting an Opinion Piece: A Guide*](#), The Earth Institute, Columbia University

- [*And Now a Word from Op-Ed*](#), David Shipley, New York Times

TIPS TO CONSIDER BEFORE DRAFTING

Your piece really *must* be original. Avoid any temptation to borrow from other op-eds or articles you have read. That is plagiarism. It is fine to get ideas from other sources, but in the end, the writing has to be original.

Write simply and clearly:

- Use plain language. Acronyms and other jargon have a place, but not in a public essay.
- Consider your audience. The average reader is not going to be an expert. It's up to you to capture their attention with a strong, well-written piece.
- Be well-positioned on the topic. If you aren't, your writing may lack credibility. You don't have to be famous or an expert, but you do need to know what you're writing about, and your op-ed needs to reflect that.
- Have current information and facts. If your piece isn't on par with current information, it will show. Double check your data before submitting to an editor.
- Go to source data when sharing facts. If you borrow from other articles or op-eds, it is possible to copy their errors into your piece. As an example, if you want to quote facts from data in the [*Oregon Death with Dignity Act annual report*](#), go directly to that

report rather than pick up data quoted in other sources. Be compelling and respectful. It is possible to point out flaws in the other side of an issue, but not point out flaws in the people who hold those views.

"To write is human, to edit is divine."

—Stephen King, Author

DRAFT YOUR OP-ED

There are a couple of different structure approaches you can use to craft a well-written op-ed. This format is a commonly used approach and will help you zero in to keep your writing focused:

Headline

Regardless of which structure you use, submit your own headline with the op-ed, otherwise the editor will choose a headline that highlights the conflict on the issue. Your headline may not be used, but you have a much better chance if you submit one. Your title should hook a reader right away as they scan the newspaper. Who would not read an op-ed with any of these titles?

- *From My Pancreas to Yours*
- *Minding My Own Death*
- *It Ain't Easy, but it Should Be*
- *Declaration From a Dying Man*

Byline

Include the author's name and title if they have one, along with a very short bio sentence (no more than 20 words).

John Doe, PhD, Professor of Ancient

Literature at XYZ University, is a resident with terminal illness of Portland, ME and can be reached at [email address].

Thesis Statement

Begin your op-ed with a strong statement of opinion, so people know right away where you are coming from. You can also start with a very brief story that leads into the thesis statement. In this example, the thesis is: this law should pass. As written, it is 81 words reduced from a draft of 125:

I am dying, and I don't want to be. But there it is. The facts about my health are undeniable. As an educated, reasonably well-adjusted person who has lived my entire life with autonomy and self-determination, I have every right to expect my death should go the same. Our lawmakers and governor must do the right thing: give Mainers access to death with dignity. We have waited 25 years. No more waiting. They must pass [bill number, title] sponsored by [lawmaker].

Reason

Follow up with the reason the author has this opinion (64 words after editing):

Living with pancreatic cancer for over five years has not been easy. Dying with it is horrific. Cancer has stolen my vitality, taken my ability to live an independent life, and may kill me before the end of this legislative session. A legal, medical standard of care exists to ease my suffering. Just not in Maine. And I am not going down without comment.

Facts

Add brief facts to support the presented opinion. Be sure to keep it very brief, perhaps one or two sentences in a paragraph. This example is 117 words without the reference citation.

Note how some facts are implied, like the fact that accessing death with dignity is a patient-driven choice. Some facts are personal, like the author's remarks about his own physicians:

The truth is, 3 out of 4 surveyed adults in [xyz poll] agree we should have a death with dignity law to help patients with terminal illness if they want to access it.

Over fifty percent of surveyed physicians in [xyz poll] also agree their patients should be able to access death with dignity under a safeguarded law if they choose.

My oncologist and hospice physicians want the law so they can safely help me die on my own terms. They understand more about cancer and suffering than anyone else I know. They respect my right to access patient-centered care.

The Oregon Death with Dignity Act has proven to work exactly as intended and for exactly whom intended [add reference citation].

Conclusion

The final paragraph should reinforce the author's opinion and reason(s) for having that opinion. It can also include encouragement for others to take an

action, e.g., voters to vote a certain way, governor to support a bill, etc. This example wraps up with 127 words, bringing the total op-ed word count to 389, well within the range of most editorial requirements:

I do not expect everyone to agree with my end-of-life decisions, but I do expect everyone to acknowledge they do not have a right to make them for me. That is up to me. I will sort out my own dying details with my family, my physicians, and my faith leader. After all, it's my pancreas. If you do not agree, I respectfully ask you to tend to your own death.

For the love of humanity, contact your legislators today to urge passage of [bill number, title, link to legislature search area to find lawmakers]. Tell them you read my op-ed.

Reach out to our local organization [xyz] or Death with Dignity National Center [website] to join the movement for expanding end-of-life care.

This patient example for a local paper is just one way to approach using the outline. It is written from a specific personal perspective with boldly stated opinions and facts to back it up. It packs a lot of information into less than 400 words. Imagine how much deeper the author could take this if his paper allowed 600 to 800 words for a guest column op-ed.

Resource: [The OpEd Project](#)

A FINAL NOTE

Title and author information are not included in word count. Be sure to provide complete contact information with the submission:

- Full first and last name
- Mailing address
- Phone number with area code
- Email address

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Editors will use this information to confirm the submission if they intend to publish it.

Prior to submitting, take extra time to consider what you've written. Even a day or two of reflection may give you more insights or solutions to editing that will further empower your writing. Practice reading it out loud. This will help you catch any typographical or grammatical errors and reveal areas where editing may make it easier for others to read it. Try having someone else read it back to you.

Don't make yourself crazy. As with any creative piece, there comes a time to call it finished. Make final spelling and grammar checks after the last edit and submit your op-ed according to publication requirements.