

Writing and Op-ed:

***Begin with reading this example from one of my old students, Dhruv that he wrote during Medical School.**

<https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20191011.432819/full/>

Track the news and jump at opportunities. Timing is essential. When an issue is dominating the news (e.g., COVID-19 virus) — that's what readers want to read and op-ed editors want to publish. Whenever possible, therefore, link your issue explicitly to something happening in the news. If you're a researcher studying cancer, for instance, start off by discussing the celebrity who died yesterday. Or, look ahead to a holiday or election a week from now that will provide a fresh news peg (and enable editors to plan the story in advance).

Limit the article to 750 words. Shorter is even better. Some academic authors insist they need more room to explain their argument. Unfortunately, newspapers have limited space to offer, and editors generally won't take the time to cut a long article down to size. Remember, this is NOT an academic argument. It's an actual opinion piece so a full roadmap is NOT necessary

Make a single point - well. You cannot solve all of the world's problems in 750 words. Be satisfied with making a single point clearly and persuasively. If you cannot explain your rationale in submitting in a sentence or two, you're trying to cover too much.

Put your main point on top. You're not writing for Science or The Quarterly Journal of Economics. You have no more than 10 seconds to "define relevance" to a busy reader, which means you shouldn't "clear your throat" with a witticism or historical aside. Just get to the point and convince the reader that it's worth his or her valuable time to continue.

Tell readers why they should care. Put yourself in the place of the busy person looking at your article. At the end of every few paragraphs, ask out loud: "So what? Who cares?" You need to answer these questions (not causally but rather philosophically). Will your suggestions help readers' health? Protect them from disease? Make their children happier? Explain why. Appeals to self-interest usually are more effective than abstract punditry.

Offer specific recommendations. An op-ed is not a news story that simply describes a situation; it is your opinion about how to improve matters. Don't be satisfied, as you might in a classroom, with mere analysis. In an op-ed article you need to offer recommendations. How exactly should North Carolina safeguard its environment, or the White House change its foreign policy? You'll need to do more than call for "more research!" or suggest that opposing parties work out their differences.

Use short sentences and paragraphs. Look at the sample op-ed article above and count the number of words per sentence. You'll probably find the sentences to be quite short. You should use the same style, relying mainly on simple declarative sentences. Cut long paragraphs into two or more shorter ones.

Don't be afraid of the personal voice. Academics often avoid first-person exposition in professional journals, which rarely begin with phrases like "You won't believe what I found when I was working in my lab on Research Drive last month." When it comes to op-eds, however, it's good to use the personal voice whenever possible. If you were a physician, you'd describe the plight of one of your patients. If you worked with poor families in the Triangle, tell their stories to help argue your point.

Avoid jargon. If a technical detail is not essential to your argument, don't use it. When in doubt, leave it out. Simple language doesn't mean simple thinking; it means you are being considerate of readers who lack your expertise and are sitting half-awake at their breakfast table or computer screen.

Use the active voice. Don't write: "It is hoped that [or: One would hope that] the government will . . ." Instead, say "I hope the government will . . ." Active voice is nearly always better than passive voice in non-academic texts. It's

easier to read, and it leaves no doubt about who is doing the hoping, recommending or other action.

Avoid tedious rebuttals. If you've written your article in response to an earlier piece that made your blood boil, avoid the temptation to prepare a point-by-point rebuttal. It makes you look petty. It's likely that readers didn't see the earlier article and, if they did, they've probably forgotten it. So, just take a deep breath, mention the earlier article once and argue your own case.

Acknowledge the other side. People writing op-ed articles sometimes make the mistake of piling on one reason after another why they're right and their opponents are wrong, if not idiots. They'd probably appear more credible, and almost certainly more humble and appealing, if they took a moment to acknowledge the ways in which their opponents are right.

Make your ending memorable. Unlike what I taught you about academic writing, when writing for the op-ed page, it's important to summarize your argument in a strong final paragraph. That's because many casual readers scan the headline, skim the opening column and then read only the final paragraph and byline. In fact, one trick many columnists use is to conclude with a phrase or thought that they used in the opening, thereby closing the circle.

Relax and have fun. Many authors, particularly academics, approach an op-ed article as an exercise in solemnity. Frankly, they'd improve their chances of getting published if they'd lighten up, have some fun with language and entertain the reader a bit. Newspaper editors despair of weighty articles - known in the trade as "thumb suckers" - and delight in an academic writer who chooses examples from pop culture.