

Be an Advocate

How to Write an Op-Ed

An op-ed piece derives its name from originally having appeared opposite the editorial page in a newspaper. Today, the term is used more widely to represent a column that represents the strong, informed, and focused opinion of the writer on an issue of relevance to a targeted audience.

Distinguishing Characteristics of an Op-Ed or Column

Partly, a column is defined by where it appears, but it shares some common characteristics: • Typically, it is short, **usually no more than 700 words**.

- It has a clearly defined point and point of view.
- It represents clarity of thinking.
- It contains the strong, unique voice of the writer.

Questions to Ask Yourself When Writing an Op-Ed or Column

- Do I have a clear point to make? What is it?
- Who cares? (Who is it that you are trying to convince?)
- Why are you targeting that specific reader?)
- Is there substance to my argument?

Topic and Theme

Every successful op-ed piece or column must have a clearly defined topic and theme.

- **Topic:** the person, place, issue, incident, or thing that is the primary focus of the column. The topic is usually stated in the first paragraph.
- **Theme:** another level of meaning to the topic. What's the big, overarching idea of the column? What is your point? Why is your point important? The theme may appear early in the piece or it may appear later when it may also serve as a turning point into a deeper level of argument.

Research

While columns and op-ed pieces allow writers to include their own voice and express an opinion, to be successful the columns must be grounded in solid research. Research involves acquiring facts, quotations, citations, or data from sources and personal observation. Research also allows a reader to include sensory data (touch, taste, smell, sound, or sight) into a column. There are two basic methods of research:

- *Field research:* going to the scene, interviews, legwork; primary materials, observations, and knowledge
- *Library, academic, or internet research:* using secondary materials, including charts, and scholarly articles

cont.



Openings

The first line of an op-ed is crucial. The opening “hook” may grab the reader’s attention with a strong claim, a surprising fact, a metaphor, a mystery, or a counter-intuitive observation that entices the reader into reading more. The opening also briefly lays the foundation for your argument.

Endings

Every good column or op-ed piece needs a strong ending which has some basic requirements. It:

- Echoes or answers introduction
- Has been foreshadowed by preceding thematic statements
- Is the last and often most memorable detail
- Contains a final epiphany or calls the reader to action

Voice

Having a strong voice is critical to a successful column or op-ed piece. Columns are most typically conversational in tone, so you can imagine yourself have a conversation with your reader as you write (a short, focused conversation). But the range of voice used in columns can be wide: contemplative, conversational, descriptive, experienced, informative, informed, introspective, observant, plaintive, reportorial, self-effacing, sophisticated, humorous, among many other possibilities.

Sometimes what voice you use is driven by the publication for which you are writing. A good method of perfecting your voice is to get in the habit of reading your column or op-ed out loud. Doing so gives you a clear sense of how your piece might sound – what your voice may come off as – to your intended reader.

Revision Checklist

Some things to remember as you revise your op-ed or column before you submit it for publication:

- Check clarity and simplicity.
- Check coherence and unity.
- Check voice and tone (Most are conversational; some require an authoritative voice).
- Check direct quotations and paraphrasing for accuracy.
- Check to make sure you properly credit all sources (though formal citations are not necessary.)
- Check the consistency of your opinion throughout your op-ed or column.

cont.



Submission Tips

Make sure you check the maximum word count in the editorial page guidelines and **email your op-ed to an actual editor** from the publication's masthead rather than just submitting via an online form. Have your piece ready **at least one week** before you want it to hit the papers. Or if you are responding to a recent article or event, do so within the first few days afterward. **Don't forget to include your phone number and email address.**

Adapted from a longer document at the Harvard Kennedy School Communications Program:
[projects.iq.harvard.edu › files › hks-communications-program › files](https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hks-communications-program/files)



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