

Opinions Count: Write and Submit an Op-Ed

Op-ed is an abbreviation for “opposite the editorial page” and can denote both the page itself and the opinion pieces that a newspaper publishes on it. Newspapers generally have a stable of op-ed columnists and regular contributors, but most also print op-eds written by outside authors.

Editors may choose to publish op-eds that express a different opinion than those expressed in editorials to balance coverage of a timely issue. Other times op-eds are selected for their unique response or fresh perspective on a current event or news story. And often op-eds are published because they are written by a prominent member of the community (e.g. a past political leader, a member of the clergy, an academic, an organizational leader).

Simply put, op-eds express the opinion of the author on a particular issue and can offer an excellent opportunity to advance your messages. Knowing the basics of writing and submitting an op-ed can increase your chances of getting published.

FOLLOW THE RULES. All newspapers have guidelines for op-ed submissions that generally include a maximum word count (usually 600–750 words), exclusivity rules (requiring that an op-ed only be submitted to one paper in the country or in a specific region), and instructions for how to submit the piece.

It is important to adhere to an outlet’s guidelines, particularly exclusivity. Failing to do so will likely cause your submission to be rejected, no matter how well written it is. Many newspapers post guidelines on their websites. If not, call the editorial assistant or op-ed editor. While you have him or her on the phone, introduce yourself, share your idea, and ask if it would be a good fit for the paper.

SUBMIT THE RIGHT STUFF. *New York Times* op-ed editor David Shipley wrote an article about how the *Times* selects op-eds. He looks for timeliness, ingenuity, strength of argument, freshness of opinion, clear writing, and newsworthiness. When writing your op-ed, keep the following in mind:

- ▶ **Focus.** Don’t try to do too much. It’s better to develop and support one argument thoroughly, with plenty of detail, than to try to cover several more generally. By trying to say everything, you may end up saying nothing.
- ▶ **Support.** Your opinion needs to be supported by hard facts and, if possible, powerful statistics. This will give your op-ed weight and enable it to stand up to criticism. Be careful, though, that you do not overload your op-ed with numbers. Three to four key facts or statistics is ideal.

- ▶ **Illustrate.** A well-chosen personal story or real-life example will give life to your argument and demonstrate the human consequences of your issue.
- ▶ **Speak plainly.** You may be tempted to put jargon into your op-ed. Resist the temptation! Write as if you were talking to a friend or neighbor. For a clear argument, use everyday language.

INCLUDE NCJW AND THE PLAN A CAMPAIGN. You can enhance the credibility of your op-ed by including information about NCJW, the Plan A campaign, and your coalition efforts (if applicable), either in the body of the op-ed or in the brief description of the author that appears at the end. Take care not to make the op-ed too much about NCJW or Plan A — newspapers generally won't print op-eds that they deem too self-promotional.

EDIT, EDIT, EDIT. Make sure that your submission does not contain slang, acronyms, or grammar or spelling errors. Ask someone else to read it for clarity.

SUBMIT AND FOLLOW UP. Submit your op-ed, following the newspaper's instructions for doing so. If you don't hear anything after several days, follow up with the op-ed editor to see if your submission is under consideration. Ask if there are any revisions that you could make to increase its chances of being published.

If the piece is accepted, work with the newspaper to edit it as needed. And save a copy once it is printed. The life of an op-ed is not over once it appears in a newspaper. Distribute copies of the op-ed to any interested individuals — potential members, supporters, donors, and coalition partners — and send a copy to your decision-makers, such as local, state, or federal legislators.

If the piece is rejected, ask the op-ed editor how you can improve future submissions. Newspapers sometimes commission op-eds, so developing a relationship with the editor can improve your future chances. Also, if it is still timely, consider submitting the piece to another newspaper.