Worksheet: Crafting effective op-eds

Op-eds are a powerful way to bring public health and social justice issues to the public's attention, and to reach policymakers with suggestions for concrete policy solutions. An op-ed is a proactive media tactic that can help you expand the frame and shift the narrative around your issue to encourage readers to consider structural change to solve the problems in our society. Writing one can help support your overall social change strategy.

To get started, use the components of a message to describe the problem, name the solution or change you would like to see, and remind audiences why your perspective matters. Use this worksheet to organize your ideas.

Structure and content

Headline: What headline about your issue do you want to see? Although editors (rather than reporters or guest authors) usually write headlines, it doesn't hurt to provide your preferred headline. It's a chance to frame the piece strategically, and some editors will take the suggestion.

First paragraph: Op-eds are opinion pieces, but they still need news hooks. Editors will want to know what makes your issue important *now*. See the elements of newsworthiness for ideas. Use personal or professional stories to illustrate the issue, but be sure to connect the stories to the structural and systemic parts of the problem.

Body paragraphs: Preview the solution you are advocating for in the first few paragraphs — if you leave it until the end, people may not read that far. Let the reader know where you are going; then take them there. Additionally:

- Use values to emphasize why your solution is needed and inspire readers to act.

- Provide some background that explains how we got to this point.

- Describe with a few tangible examples how the solution is going to address the problem.

- Name the person or organization that needs to take action to put your solution in place.

Make every Who holler! Make every Who shout!

> *Dr. Seuss*

- Use metaphors or analogies to paint a picture of the problem or the solution and show that change is possible.

- Be judicious about the data you present; data can be overwhelming or make people tune out. Use social math to make numbers or data points compelling and easy to understand.

Concluding paragraph: Reiterate your values and the vision you have for society that your solution can bring. Invite readers to join you in that vision.

Planning worksheet

Use these prompts to organize your thoughts about an op-ed you would like to write. After making notes, try writing without stopping or editing for several minutes to get your thoughts flowing. Then you can begin to shape a first draft.

The subject I would like to cover in my op-ed is:

_____

_____

The personal or professional stories I can tell to illustrate the issue are:

_____

_____

The specific policy solution I want to advocate for is:

_____

_____

Key points that would convince policymakers that this is the right solution are: (Address the core message questions: What's wrong? Why does it matter? And, what should be done?)

_____

_____

_____

The compelling facts or social math that can help make my case are:

_____

_____

_____

The metaphors or images that might help reinforce the point are: (Consider what picture should come to mind when the target reads the op-ed)

_____

_____

Submission considerations

Word limits

Because op-eds are brief, you will need to be strategic about the solutions you focus on and the angle you take. Op-eds are just one part of a communication strategy — be selective; you don't have to comprehensively communicate everything about your issue in a single piece. Most publications have a 600-word limit; check the news outlet's guidelines.

Authors

Be strategic in choosing your authors. Is there a group you want to partner with on an op-ed so your voices can be heard together? Think about whose voice is missing in the current conversation, who is an authentic voice that can leverage lived experience, and who might get the attention of the target audience. Limit your authors to no more than three people.

Publication

The news outlet you select must be able to reach your target. While there may be many options, make sure to only submit your op-ed to one outlet at a time, as newspapers and magazines want to publish original and exclusive content. If your top publication choice declines, then submit your op-ed to your next choice.

After you submit

Once you have pitched your op-ed, keep your ringer turned on and make sure you are available to answer any questions from journalists in the hours and days following your submission. Journalists often operate on tight deadlines; if they have questions and you are unreachable, you risk your piece being cut, especially if it is closely tied to a time-sensitive issue in the news cycle.

After your op-ed is published

Once your op-ed gets published, increase its impact by circulating it to allies, funders, policymakers, reporters, and editorial boards with whom you plan to meet. Post it on social media. If your op-ed was not selected, look for other newsworthy opportunities to submit a revised version of your piece to a different publication. Perhaps use part of it in a letter to the editor to respond to news coverage of your issue.

Pitching your op-ed

Once finished, you will need to pitch the op-ed to an editor and ask the news outlet to publish it. You can do this in an email or, for some news outlets, submit it online (be sure to follow their instructions carefully). For an email, use a short subject line to capture the editor's attention. Write a few lines at the top of the email saying who you are, why this is relevant to the news outlet's readers, and why it is important *now*. Then paste in your op-ed and hit send!

Here's a template to get you started on crafting your email pitch:

Subject line: [Main issue] + [newsworthiness]

Email body:

Hello [editor's name],

I am [name] [relevant role]. I am submitting an op-ed on [main issue] with crucial information for your readers. In my piece I explain [main point]. This is timely because [newsworthiness].

[paste your op-ed]

Sincerely,

[your name(s)]

[contact information, including ways to reach you after hours]