

YOUR WORDS IN PRINT

A guide to effective advocacy through letters to the editor and op-eds.

The opinion page is one of the most well read sections in a newspaper, as it is the space where the views of the community are shared and debated. Newspaper editors read letters from readers to gauge their interests. Members of Congress read the opinion pages to learn how their constituents feel about the issues.

Given the high number of submissions they receive each day, editors publish just a few letters to the editor or opinion pieces, especially at large, regional newspapers. Smaller newspapers are more likely to print submissions (they have a harder time filling their pages).

Most newspapers have information on their Web site about how to submit letters or opinion pieces, including email addresses, such as letters@newspapername.com. They might also list length or style preferences. *The New York Times*, for example, explains how letters and op-eds are chosen at: www.nytimes.com/pages/opinion.

In this guide, you will find a few tips on how to make your submission stand out.



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Opinion Editorials

Opinion editorials (op-eds) are short, guest pieces printed in the editorial section of a newspaper. They are typically between 700-750 words and outline three ideas: the problem, the solution, and the call to action. Always tailor the action requested to the audience targeted. Keep these tips in mind when writing an op-ed:

- **Monitor your chosen outlet.** Read the op-eds that appear in the paper you're targeting so you can get a better sense of the appropriate style and audience.
- **Be succinct.** Use short, simple sentences and avoid jargon. Be careful to avoid writing a slowly unfolding essay. Get to the point.
- **Don't equivocate.** Remember your call to action and be sure to state it clearly.
- **Personalize it.** Provide an anecdote from your own experience.
- **Provide insight.** Educate your reader without being preachy.
- **Be timely.** Try to link your op-ed with a hook, such as the timeliness of the legislation you are writing about.
- **Think locally.** Don't forget to make it of interest to the readership in your community.

Try the following outline for your op-ed:

- Start with a personal anecdote.
- Make your main point in the second paragraph.
- Begin to elaborate on two, at most three, supporting points in the following paragraphs. Make sure your paragraphs are short and contain one main idea each.
- Use facts, statistics and studies (Oxfam may be able to provide some of this information to assist you), and the experience you have to support your arguments. Do not, however, be overly legal or formal.
- Conclude with a paragraph that draws the piece together and links to your opening anecdote.

Letters to the Editor

It's well worth the effort to submit letters to the editor because they provide the opportunity to educate thousands of people in a community—from your next-door neighbor to your member of Congress.

Eight steps

1. Understand why it's important

- Letters help editors decide which stories to cover.
- Members of Congress closely monitor letters to gauge the opinions of their constituents.
- Letters encourage a public dialogue.

2. Prep yourself

- Check your paper for guidelines by looking at the opinion section of their Web site and the other letters they publish.
- You can submit your letter via email or fax.
- Include your contact information (name, email, and phone).

3. Be timely

- Your letter is much more likely to be published if it refutes, contributes to, or corrects a recently published piece from the media outlet.
- After you identify a story or editorial that needs a response, submit your letter as soon as possible—ideally the same day the article ran, but no longer than three days after it was published. Don't forget to reference the article.

4. Be short and sweet

- Try to keep your letter under 200 words.
- Stay on topic. Keep your letter brief and to the point. Focus on making one key point in two or three paragraphs, and use just a couple of key facts or statistics, or a very brief story, to support your argument.
- Present your experience. Add a personal touch.

- Work the local angle. Always connect it back to the community.

5. Feel free to praise

- Every letter doesn't have to be critical. If a newspaper positively covers issues you are concerned about, write a letter praising or thanking the media outlet for this coverage or support.

6. Take time and thought

- Organize your letter logically.
- Address the issue.
- Make your statement.
- Present solid evidence. You can refer to the key messages in this guide.
- Keep it positive.
- Demonstrate your reach (e.g., there are X supporters for X legislation in this community).
- Close by recapping (i.e., restate your position, make your recommendation, and don't forget the call to action).

7. Before you finish...

- Double-check your facts, figures, and all quotations.
- Proofread your letter carefully for spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- Get feedback.

8. Make it count

- If you want to catch the attention of your member of Congress, mention them by name.
- Explain the need for change, and include the main ask.
- Use your credentials. If you have personal experience or expertise in the subject area, mention it. This gives credence and authority to your statements.
- Follow up. Call to make sure the paper received your letter, and then call a few days later to find out if it will be printed.