WRITING AN OP-ED

An op-ed, abbreviated from “opposite the editorial page,” is a short newspaper article that expresses the opinions of a named writer who is unaffiliated with the newspaper’s editorial board. Op-eds differ from editorials, which are usually unsigned and written by editorial board members, and can be submitted by the general public. Writing an op-ed provides the chance to voice an opinion on a recent event or political issue; however op-eds are not in direct response to something already published. Op-eds are a great way influence fellow citizens, as well as your members of Congress and state legislators. The tips below will help you to write a persuasive op-ed for submission to national, state, and local outlets.

THE BASICS

Your op-ed should build a persuasive case for one—and only one—issue or position. In general, op-eds should range from 600-800 words. Find out the length requirements and submission deadlines for op-eds by contacting your local newspapers. You’ll want to know how to submit your piece (email, fax, post); when you can submit and how long it will likely take to be published; and required format. Some papers only accept exclusive submissions that cannot be sent to other papers. Ask for any other rules about op-ed submissions before you write your piece. Though an op-ed can be submitted to any outlet, your piece is more likely to be placed in a local newspaper where you have roots.

WHAT TO INCLUDE

To write an effective op-ed, begin with a first sentence that grabs the reader’s attention and clearly introduces your point. From there, be clear, concise, and strong with your message. The body of your op-ed should support your main argument with a few key points, illustrated and defended with selective facts and data. Just because it’s an “opinion” piece doesn’t mean you don’t need to support your view with solid facts! If there is a solution to the issue, make sure to include a few paragraphs explaining what you think we should do to address the issue. You may also choose to speak to the opposition by briefly addressing opposing arguments and demonstrating why your view is more credible. Finish strong by underscoring the importance of the issue you’ve addressed. Don’t be afraid to include personal examples and take a stand!

Remember: though an op-ed is not typically written in direct response to another article, your piece must be timely to be published. Track the news and jump at opportunities. You should link your issue explicitly to something happening in the news whenever possible or look ahead to a holiday or anniversary that will provide a fresh news hook and enable editors to plan the story in advance.
PITCHING AND PLACING YOUR PIECE

Op-eds are a coveted space in any newspaper, so it is important to identify yourself as a credible voice. Include any qualifications that support your credibility, such as job title, leadership position, or organizational affiliation and a brief biography sentence to be published with your piece. You should submit your op-ed along with a short cover letter that explains why you are writing. Provide contact information including your full name, telephone number, email address, and fax. If you submit your op-ed as an email, you should send it in the body of the email message and as an attachment.

Once you have submitted your op-ed in the paper’s preferred format, it is a good idea to follow up with a phone call. If your op-ed gets turned down, there are other media outlets you can pitch including weeklies, specialty papers and online news sites. Finally, if your piece is published, don’t forget to let the Government Relations Office know!