

How to Write a Compelling OpEd

Writing an OpEd is an effective way to get in the news while remaining in control of the argument. Opinion Editors want pieces that tell **timely, unique, credible, powerful stories that speak to their publication’s audience in an appropriate style**. Good OpEds connect research findings and implications to people’s lives, self-interest, and hopes and fears.

Elements to Consider

Goal – What do you hope to accomplish with the OpEd? Every OpEd can inform the public about an important issue or unique perspective, but it is important to think about how the piece could effect change. Consider, in an ideal world, who would read your piece, and what would happen as a result? This will inform the best tone, style, and outlet for the piece.

Outlet Specifics – Commentary sites, magazines, and newspapers are looking for pieces that abide by their length and format rules and speak to their readers in an appropriate style. Choose an intended audience and target publication, Google that publication’s requirements, and write with the outlet’s audience and style in mind.

Timely hook – OpEds should start with compelling and timely hooks to grab readers’ attention at the start. A convincing hook explains why readers should care and read further, and why now. Be cautious of hooks that are too broad or overused. For example, editors are tiring of the Trump transition and early presidency as a hook. You can be creative with your hook – sometimes less obvious or counterintuitive connections can be the most powerful.

Vivid stories – Authors writing for the general media can use the first-person “I” to recount vivid moments from their research or personal experiences. In the *Raleigh News & Observer*, sociologist Helen Marrow said “Consider Eduardo, an undocumented immigrant I interviewed in 2003 while I was writing a book on immigration and race in the South...” Similarly, in an OpEd for the *New York Times*, political scientist Andrea Campbell drew from her family’s experiences to make points about U.S. social policies.

Everyday language – OpEds are meant for wide audiences, so they use everyday language. That means no academic jargon, no acronyms, no phrases that only specialists understand. Many outlets look for pieces that are written at an 8th grade reading level. The [Hemingway Editor](#) is a useful tool to catch jargon and overly complex sentences. Analogies or humor may help.

Single voice – Although joint authorship is typical in academia, opinion editors rarely accept pieces with co-authors. Collaborators can be mentioned by name in the body of the piece. However, editors may accept pieces co-authored by a scholar and a policymaker or civic actor, which can be an excellent way to promote a common perspective on a key issue.

Links – OpEds never have footnotes, and including them shows editors that an author is unfamiliar with the format. Hyperlinks embedded in the piece, however, are encouraged.

For more on the basic structure of an OpEd, see the OpEd Project’s guide:

<http://tinyurl.com/opedstructure>

Submissions and Publications

Consider your goal when picking which news outlet to pitch. National papers can help direct the national conversation or promote a new paper or book. Regional and local papers are useful tools to influence state and local policymaking, reach a representative in Congress, or make a national conversation hit closer to home.

The *New York Times* rejects over 95 percent of all submissions, and requires three business days of exclusive review. Skipping the *Times* and submitting pieces to other national news sources like *USA Today* or *The Atlantic*, or to regional and local newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times* or *The Saint Louis Post Dispatch* can increase the likelihood of publication.

When submitting an OpEd, include a bio line. The national office recommends bio blurbs at the end that read: “[Name] is a [title] of [department] at [university] and a member of the Scholars Strategy Network.” This construction is especially appreciated if the SSN communications team has helped with editing or placement. Pitch emails or online submissions always include:

- A sentence or two describing why the editor’s readers should care about the issue at hand, and why they should care at that moment. This is your hook.
- A brief explanation for why you are a credible authority on this issue.
- Full contact information. It is best to include a cellphone number, rather than an office line. Websites sometimes request high-resolution photos of authors as well.

Generally, OpEds are offered to one publication at a time, with the exception of some local papers especially across state lines. A day or two after submission, a reminder call or email may help re-engage an editor’s attention. The SSN communications staff has helped scholars place pieces in dozens of venues and can edit and pitch pieces for current members.

After Publication

Send a very short note to the editor, thanking them for printing your piece. Please send SSN a link immediately upon publication, so that our national team can post it to the website and spread it through social media. Share the piece on social networks like Facebook and Twitter – and tag SSN. Our twitter handle is @SSNsolars. Ask friends, colleagues, and contacts who may agree with your points to share the piece themselves. They can link to it and quote from it on their blogs, comment on the piece, or even to send a Letter to the Editor to keep the conversation going.

OpEds can open doors to other avenues of influence. Use the OpEd to introduce yourself to new contacts or strengthen relationships. If an article backs a specific policy, supportive policymakers or civic groups may want to see and share it. OpEds can help persuade undecided decision-makers as well. Consider sharing your published OpEd with policymakers and their staffers, members of the press, and civic groups working on your issue. You can ask them to share the piece, give feedback, or have an in-person meeting. Include an introductory note and contact information.

For questions or to obtain more information about OpEd assistance, contact Shira Rascoe at shira@scholars.org or Adriana Mendoza at adriana@scholars.org.