

Op-Ed Writing

Op-Eds

An op-ed, originally named for its placement opposite the editorial page in newspapers, is a column where writers share strong, informed opinions on relevant topics for specific audiences. These pieces are concise, typically between **700-800 words**, requiring writers to be direct and focused. A successful op-ed features a defined main point, a unique viewpoint, clarity, and a strong, engaging voice. Writers should support their argument with thorough research and credible sources, ensuring their opinions are well-substantiated and persuasive.

Over time, the lines between various forms of opinion writing have blurred. Today, op-eds may not always be solicited or strictly opposed to the editorial stance of the publication. Essentially, an op-ed is a piece where an author, typically with expertise on a given topic, shares an educated opinion on a current, often controversial or debated issue. This differentiates it from a pure opinion piece as it relies on the author's knowledge, expertise, and experience to provide insight and informed viewpoints with evidence to support claims.

Op-Ed Examples

Below you can find several compelling and notable Op-Eds published over the last decade.

["The Climate Crisis Is Our Third World War" by Bill McKibben](#)

This piece in The New Republic drew parallels between the climate crisis and World War II, emphasizing the need for urgent and collective action to combat climate change.

["Our Democracy's Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written. Black Americans Have Fought to Make Them True." by Nikole Hannah-Jones \(2019\)](#)

Part of The 1619 Project in The New York Times, this Op-Ed re-framed American history by placing the contributions and struggles of Black Americans at the center of the national narrative.

[The Death of Honesty by William Damon | Hoover Institution](#)

Published in The Washington Post, this piece discussed the decline of honesty in American society, highlighting the ethical implications and calling for a return to integrity.

["Why I Hope to Die at 75" by Ezekiel J. Emanuel \(2014\)](#)

In The Atlantic, Emanuel argued that living too long can have negative consequences for individuals and society, sparking debates about aging, healthcare, and the value of life.

["Why Women Still Can't Have It All" by Anne-Marie Slaughter \(2012\)](#)

Published in The Atlantic, this piece sparked widespread discussion about work-life balance, gender roles, and the challenges faced by women in high-powered careers.

As you read through the samples, take note of the structure, organization, writing style and tone, audience considerations, and how claims are supported with evidence and what kind of evidence.

Structure of an Op-Ed



HEADLINE
Grabs the reader's attention and gives a hint of the main argument or perspective. Be clear and concise.

LEAD (OPENING PARAGRAPH)
Engages the reader immediately and introduces the main argument. Start with a hook like a striking fact.

CONTEXT /BACKGROUND
Provides necessary background and context information to understand the issue. Outline the situation.

MAIN ARGUMENT (BODY)
Develop your thesis with evidence and logical reasoning.
Claim plus evidence.

COUNTERARGUMENTS AND REBUTTAL
Shows you've considered opposing views and strengthens your argument. This section also demonstrates fairness.

CONCLUSION
Reinforces your main argument, and leaves a lasting impression. Summarize key points succinctly, end strong.

CALL TO ACTION
Motivates readers to take specific action based on your argument. Clearly state what you want them to do.

How to Prepare

Choosing a topic

Op-Eds must have a clearly defined topic and theme. Be sure to select a specific, current, and/or controversial topic. Avoid overly broad subjects to ensure a comprehensive yet concise discussion.

Topic Definition: Identify the main subject of your Op-Ed. This is the person, place, issue, incident, or thing you'll focus on. Usually, you should state the topic in the first paragraph. For example, if you're writing about climate change, your topic might be the impact of rising seas.

Theme Exploration: Beyond the topic, explore the overarching idea or message of your opinion piece. This is the big picture that ties everything together. Your theme should convey why your topic is important. For instance, in an Op-Ed about climate change, your theme might be the urgent need for sustainable practices to protect future generations. This is the general message.

Placement: Decide where to introduce the topic and theme (overarching message) in your piece. Often, the topic is introduced early on whereas the theme can appear early or develop as the piece progresses. Since Op-Eds are short, it is important to get to the point quickly and to think systematically about its placement in your piece. For example, you might start with a personal experience about extreme weather, then expand to the broader theme of the global climate crisis.

Understanding Your Audience

Understanding your audience is pivotal in Op-Ed writing. It informs your rhetorical strategies, including argumentation, tone, and diction. By aligning your message with your audience's values and concerns, you enhance its persuasive power and resonance. Understanding your audience ensures your piece is compelling, relevant, and capable of driving meaningful engagement and future action.

Here are questions to help guide **audience analysis**:

- What is the target or primary audience for this piece of writing? Consider demographics.
- What is the audience's current level awareness of the topic? (e.g. well-informed, unaware)
- What are the audience's primary concerns related to the topic?
- What are the audience's political and ideological leanings (if applicable)?
- What previous (or current) biases might the audience hold?
- What emotional triggers are likely to engage the audience? (e.g. fear, hope, compassion)
- How does the audience prefer to consume Op-Ed content? (e.g. short/concise or detailed)
- What rhetorical strategies will be most effective? (appeal to reason, emotion, or authority)
- What counterarguments might the audience have? Anticipate potential objections.
- What actions or change do you want the audience to support? What is the call to action?

Defining Your Purpose

- Clearly determine if you aim to express an opinion on an issue or propose a solution
- Note your purpose at the beginning of your writing process to maintain focus
- Receive feedback to ensure clarity and focus

Here are a few **examples of topics and potential arguments** for an Op-Ed:

Proposing a Solution

TOPIC
Addressing the Student Loan Crisis

SOLUTION STATEMENT: The federal government should implement a comprehensive student loan forgiveness program, coupled with reforms to higher education financing, to alleviate the burden on graduates and stimulate economic growth.

Proposing a Solution

TOPIC
The Standardized Testing Crisis in Ed

SOLUTION STATEMENT: The overemphasis on standardized testing in education system is undermining the quality of education by stifling creativity, causing undue stress among students and teachers, and failing to account for diverse learning styles and needs.

Opinion About a Problem

TOPIC
The Overemphasis on Standardized Testing

OPINION STATEMENT: Standardized testing has become an overwhelming focus in our education system, shifting creativity and critical thinking in students, and it's time we prioritize holistic learning methods over test scores.

Opinion About a Problem

TOPIC
Climate Change and Corporate Responsibility

OPINION STATEMENT: Major corporations are not doing enough to combat climate change, and their continued reliance on fossil fuels and resistance to sustainable practices are driving us toward an environmental catastrophe.

Research and Facts

Be sure to conduct research to ensure all facts and examples are accurate and relevant. Also consider your expertise and authority relative to the topic to guide how much research you might need to do. For instance, if a writer is a leading authority on a subject, less research (if any) would be required.

Choose the right research method for your piece:

Field Research: This involves going to the scene, conducting interviews, and gathering primary materials, observations, and knowledge. For example, if you're writing about local environmental issues, you might visit affected areas, interview residents, and observe conditions first-hand.

Library and Internet Research: This involves using secondary sources such as graphs, charts, scholarly articles, other Op-Eds, and data from the internet. As an example, if you are writing about the economic impact of remote work, you could cite studies and reports from academic journals and research institutions.

Prewriting Questions

- **Do I have a clear point to make?** Make sure you have a specific point you want to convey, and clearly define your main argument explicitly for your readers. For instance, if you're writing about the importance of mental health awareness, your main points might be that society needs to prioritize mental health resources and support. State this argument upfront and quickly.
- **Who cares?** Identify your target audience and explain why your argument matters to them. Writing with a specific audience in mind can help you tailor your message. If you're addressing parents in your Op-Ed about school nutrition, explain why healthy meals are crucial for their children's academic performance and overall well-being.
- **Is there substance to my argument?** Back up your argument with facts, data, expertise, and solid reasoning. For example, if you're advocating for renewable energy, provide statistics on its environmental and economic benefits (or other benefits depending on the audience).
- **What are the counterarguments?** Have you identified potential objections or counterarguments? If so what might someone with an opposing view say or argue? How will you address these points? If you are writing about increasing the minimum wage, think about concerns related to the potential impact on small businesses and how you might counter those concerns.
- **How can I engage my readers?** Make a plan for how you intend to capture and maintain your reader's attention (do an audience analysis). Consider what compelling anecdotes, vivid language, emotional or logical appeals, or striking statistics you can use to make your piece more engaging. For example, you might start with a powerful personal story that illustrates your point.
- **What is my call to action?** Decide what you want your readers to do after reading your piece. Whether it's to change their behavior, support a policy, or engage in further discussion, having a clear call to action will give your Op-Ed a sense of purpose and urgency from the start. Sometimes a call to action may be to get more informed on a timely and important topic.

How to Approach Op-Ed Writing

Writing an op-ed involves presenting a persuasive argument on a relevant issue. Start by selecting a timely and pertinent topic in your field. Conduct thorough research to ensure your opinion is well-supported by facts and data. Define your main point clearly and plan the structure of your piece. The goal is to inform and persuade your audience through a strong, unique voice and a logical argument.

Opening

A strong opening grabs your readers' attention and sets the stage for your argument. The opening should be clear, concise, and straight to the point. Do not make your reader wonder about the point.

Hook: Start with a compelling hook to draw readers in. This could be a strong claim, a surprising fact, a metaphor, a mystery, or a counter-intuitive observation. For example, you might begin an Op-Ed piece on education reform with a startling statistic: "In our city's schools, only 60% of students graduate on time."

Techniques: Use different techniques to create an engaging opening. For instance:

- *Strong claim:* "We must overhaul our education system now."
- *Surprising fact:* "Did you know that over half of our city's schools lack basic supplies?"
- *Metaphor:* "Our current education system is a sinking ship, and we need to steer it to safety."

- *Mystery*: “Why are our brightest students failing?”
- *Counter-intuitive observation*: “Smaller classrooms may not be the best learning solution.”

Foundation: The opening should briefly outline the foundation for your argument. Introduce the main point you will be discussing and hint at the direction your piece will take. For example, after presenting a startling statistic about graduation rates, you might hint at a solution you will explore: “To address this crisis, we must rethink our approach to teaching and learning,.”

Voice

Having a strong voice is critical to a successful Op-Ed or column. Your voice makes your piece engaging and unique, allowing readers to connect with your perspective. But what does voice really mean?

Tone: The typical Op-Ed is conversational. Imagine yourself having a chat with your readers on a specific topic. Use lots of “you” and “I” to create a direct and personal connection: “You might think remote work is just a trend, but I believe it’s here to stay.”

Range of Voice: Your voice can vary depending on the specific topic, your relation to that topic, and your style. It can be contemplative, descriptive, humorous, authoritative, or any combination of these. For instance:

- *Authoritative*: “Research shows that smaller class sizes lead to better student outcomes.”
- *Contemplative*: “Reflecting on our education system, it’s clear we need change.”
- *Descriptive*: “Picture a classroom where every child feels engaged and inspired.”
- *Humorous*: “If our classroom were as outdated as our education policies, we’d still be using chalk and slate.” (careful with humor; make sure it appropriate for your audience/subject)

Consistency: Maintain a consistent voice throughout your Op-Ed. This helps keep your readers engaged and ensures your piece feels cohesive. If you start with a conversational tone, don’t suddenly switch to an overly formal style halfway through.

Adaption: Sometimes, your voice may be influenced by the publication you’re writing for (if it is a publication). Get in the habit of reading other columns (or kinds of Op-Eds) from the same publication to understand the preferred style and requirements. For instance, if you’re writing for a publication known for its witty and informal tone, your piece should match that style.

Endings

The ending of your Op-Ed is just as important as the opening. A strong and clear conclusion leaves a lasting impression on your readers and reinforces your main argument directly and concisely.

Echo or Answer the Introduction: Your ending should connect back to your opening, either by echoing it or answering a question posed at the beginning. For instance, if you started with a statistic about graduation rates, you might end with a hopeful note on how proposed reforms could improve those rates.

Foreshadowing: The ending should be foreshadowed by thematic statements throughout the piece. This creates a sense of cohesion and ensures your argument flows logically to its

conclusion. If you've discussed various education reforms, your ending might highlight the most promising solution.

Memorable Detail: The last sentence should be one of the most memorable parts of your Op-Ed. Use a powerful statement, a call to action, or a poignant observation to leave a strong impression. For instance, "Our children's future depends on the choices we make today."

Open Ended: This type of ending suggests rather than states a conclusion, leaving the reader to think and reflect. You might end with, "What kind of future do we want for our children?"

Closed Ending: This type of ending suggests rather than states a conclusion, resolving the main points of the piece. For example, "Implementing these reforms will ensure every child has the opportunity to succeed."

Authority and Credibility

Authority and **credibility** are essential in Op-Ed writing because they help to establish the foundation of **trust** between the writer and the audience and there are ways that you can demonstrate yours.

When an author demonstrates **authority** on a topic, it means they possess significant knowledge, expertise, and experience in the field. This depth of understanding makes their arguments more compelling and trust-worthy. Readers are more likely to be persuaded by someone with authority who clearly knows what they are talking about, as opposed to someone whose expertise is questionable.

Credibility, on the other hand, is about trust-worthiness and reliability. A credible writer presents well-researched, accurate, and fair arguments. This involves citing reliable sources, providing evidence to back up claims, and acknowledging counterarguments respectfully. When an Op-Ed writer is seen as credible, readers are more likely to engage with their ideas seriously, even if they disagree.

Here are ways you might establish authority and credibility:

Expert Credentials:

"As a cardiologist with over 20 years of experience treating heart disease, I have seen firsthand the impact of lifestyle changes on cardiovascular health."

Professional Experience:

"Having served as the Chief of Police for a decade, I can attest to the effectiveness of community policing in reducing crime rates."

Academic Qualifications:

"As professor of environmental science at (Z University), my research focuses on sustainable farming practices and their impact on soil health."

Professional Experience in the Field:

"After working for 15 years as a social worker in underprivileged communities, I understand the urgent need for accessible and comprehensive mental health services."

Published Research:

“In my recent study published in the Journal of Public Health, I analyzed the correlation between air pollution and respiratory illnesses in urban areas.”

Leadership Roles:

“As the former president of the National Education Association, I have advocated for educational reforms that address the needs of both teachers and students.”

Professional Affiliations:

“As a member of the American Medical Association’s Ethics Committee, I have participated in numerous discussions on patient care standards and ethical practices.”

Awards and Recognition:

“Recipient of the 2022 Innovator Award in Renewable Energy, I have developed new technologies that significantly reduce carbon emissions.”

Fieldwork and On-the-Ground Experience:

“During my time as an aid worker in conflict zones, I witnessed the dire consequences of inadequate humanitarian assistance.”

Historical Context and Long-Term Observation:

“Having studied urban development trends for over 30 years, I can draw on parallels between past policies and the current housing crisis.”

The combination of authority and credibility helps the writer effectively influence public opinion and drive action. For instance, a scientist writing about climate change will likely be taken more seriously if they have a proven track record of environmental research. Similarly, a healthcare professional discussing public health measures gains trust through their direct experience and factual accuracy.

Example Op-Ed Outline

Mapping out the structure and content of an Op-Ed is an important part of the writing process. Below is just one example of how you might approach your Op-Ed. If you are having difficulty with structure, use this outline as a guide to support the development of one and get feedback on your approach.

Topic: The Overemphasis on Standardized Testing in Schools

Opinion Statement:

"Standardized testing has become an overwhelming focus in our education system, stifling creativity and critical thinking in students, and it's time we prioritize holistic learning methods over test scores."

Introduction:

- Briefly introduce the prevalence of standardized testing in schools.
- State the opinion: Standardized testing is harming students' education and should be de-emphasized in favor of more comprehensive learning approaches.

Body:

1. **Impact on Students:**

- Discuss how standardized testing creates undue stress and anxiety for students.
- Provide evidence on how test-centric education narrows the curriculum, focusing only on testable subjects.

2. **Creativity and Critical Thinking:**

- Explain how the focus on standardized tests limits opportunities for creative and critical thinking.
- Share examples of how alternative education models (like project-based learning) foster these essential skills

3. **Teacher and School Evaluation:**

- Critique the use of test scores to evaluate teacher performance and school effectiveness.
- Offer insights into how this practice can lead to teaching to the test and neglect of broader educational goals.

4. **Equity Issues:**

- Address how standardized tests can exacerbate educational inequalities.
- Include data or studies showing the correlation between socioeconomic status and test performance.

Conclusion:

- Reiterate the need to shift away from a test-focused education system.
- Suggest actionable steps for policymakers, educators, and communities to implement more holistic and equitable assessment methods.

Writing and Language Tips

Use Simple Direct Language

Strive for clear, straightforward words. Avoid complex vocabulary that may confuse readers. For example, instead of "utilize" choose "use."

Write Short Sentences

Keep sentences concise. Short sentences are easier to understand and more impactful. Aim for 15-20 words per sentence.

Audience-Centric Language

Use language and points that resonate with your audience's background, expectations, and interests. Engage with audience.

Use Active Voice

Active voice makes your writing more engaging and direct. Instead of "The law was passed by..." write "The government passed the law."

Be Consistent with Tenses

Use the same tense throughout your piece to avoid confusion. If you start in the present tense, stay in the present tense.

Break up Long Paragraphs

Use shorter paragraphs to make your op-ed more readable. Each paragraph should contain one main idea.

Example Paragraph 1: Seatbelts save lives. They are necessary in every vehicle. Paragraph 2: Yet many buses still lack this basic safety feature.

Use Rhetorical Questions

Engage your readers by asking rhetorical questions. These questions don't need answers but encourage readers to think.

Example: What if students learned from evolving questions?

Metaphors and Anecdotes

Use metaphors and anecdotes to illustrate points vividly and make your argument more compelling.

Vary Sentence Structure

Mix short and long sentences to keep readers engaged. Start some sentences with different words or phrases to add variety.

Use Transitions to Connect Ideas

Use transition words like "however," "therefore," "next," and "consequently" to help clarify relationships between sentences and paragraphs and guide your readers through your argument.

Revision Checklist

Revision is an important part of the writing process. Reviewing, revising, and editing your work can be done on your own, but it is best to get feedback from another reader in addition to your own revisions.

Here is a check list to support your revisions:

Content and Argument

- Is your main argument clear and concise?
- Is the thesis presented early in the piece?
- Have you included strong, credible evidence to support your claims?
- Have you considered and addressed your authority relative to the topic?
- If you have limited authority, have you included strong, credible evidence?
- Are there relevant statistics, anecdotes, or expert opinions?
- Is your topic current and relevant to your audience?
- Does it address a pressing issue or unique perspective?
- Have you considered and addressed counterarguments?
- Are your responses to opposing views respectful and logical?

Structure and Organization

- Does the introduction grab the reader's attention?
- Do paragraphs transition smoothly from one to the next? (read aloud)
- Does the conclusion effectively summarize the argument?
- Does the conclusion leave the reader with a strong, memorable impression or call to action?

Style and Tone

- Is the language clear, concise, and free of jargon?
- Are there varied sentence structures to maintain reader interest? (short, long)
- Are rhetorical devices used effectively (e.g. rhetorical questions, analogies, emotional appeals)?
- Are there any [logical fallacies](#) that need to be corrected? (e.g. over-generalization)

Technical Accuracy

- Are there any grammatical errors or awkward sentences?
- Is the punctuation correct?
- Are there any spelling mistakes?
- Are the words chosen precise and impactful?
- Are there consistent use of tenses, pronouns, and style?
- Have you followed the style guide of the publication? (if applicable)

Final Checks

- Is the Op-Ed within the word limit specified by the publication (usually around 700)?
- Is every word, sentence, and paragraph necessary?
- Are the sources properly cited?
- Is there a need for additional attribution?
- Is the piece likely to engage and provoke thought among readers?

- Have you had someone else review your piece for clarity and impact?
- Have you incorporated constructive feedback?
- Have you read the piece out loud to catch any remaining issues?

Additional Resources

[Op-Ed Writing: Tips and Tricks, Op-Ed Project](#)

[Writing Effective Op-Eds Toolkit, Duke University](#)

[Tips for Aspiring Op-Ed Writers, NYTimes](#)

[Op-Ed Communication Kit, MIT Comm Lab](#)

[Rhetorical Questions, Grammarly](#)

[Transition Words and Phrases, Grammarly](#)

[Transition Words for Paragraphs, Grammarly](#)

[Logical Fallacies, Purdue Owl Writing](#)

[15 Logical Fallacies to Know, Grammarly](#)

[How to Write an Op-Ed, Harvard Kennedy School](#)

[Rhetorical Appeals, Writing Commons](#)

[Opinion Writing, Education Week](#)

Additional Op-Ed Examples

[The School Issues We're Battling Over Aren't the Ones That Matter, Op-Ed, New York Times](#)

[Why Higher Ed Should Advocate for Universal Early Learning Coverage in 2024 Election](#)

[Today's Students Expect More. Are You Listening?, Higher Ed](#)

[Why is the Nation Invested in Tearing Down Public Education, Education Week](#)

[Higher Education on the Edge, US News](#)