

Getting the Word Out: Letters to the Editor and Op-Eds

Op-eds and Letters to the Editor are ways to share views on victims' rights with the broader community and to increase name recognition of the organization. What follows are some tips and basic guidance for each type of outreach.

Letter to the Editor Basics

Letters to the Editor are generally in direct response to an article, editorial, op-ed, or column previously appearing in the publication targeted. They can also be a reaction to or notification of a newsworthy event. These are usually 100-250 words. These are printed/included on the editorial page, one of the most-read pages of publications. These can be published in a quicker turnaround than an op-ed. Use a letter to the editor when:

- topic has been mentioned in the publication recently, especially on the opinion page;
- you have just one or two points that can be succinctly stated; and
- you can write within one day.

Op-ed Basics

The term "op-ed" is derived from its original placement – i.e., pieces that appeared opposite the editorial page in a newspaper. The term is used more broadly today to represent a column that represents the strong, informed, and focused opinion of the writer on an issue of relevance to a targeted audience. These are generally 700-1,000 words. Use an op-ed when:

- topic will be of interest to most of the publication's readers;
- contribution is new, interesting, unexpected, and will be relevant in a few weeks' time;
- topic requires slightly more words; and
- you are willing to pitch your piece to the editors.

Tips for Both

1. Prepare. Know your key issues/positions and have evergreen (aka, long-lasting) language ready to plug into a piece.
2. Monitor. Particularly important for letters because they are generally in direct response to recently published item; scan regularly for opportunities connected to top priorities.
3. Act fast. Submit as quickly as possible. For letters to the editor this means the same day or within 24 hours of item to which you are responding; for op-eds it can be slightly longer.
4. Make editorial contact. Cultivate relationships for a current and future pieces; outreach will likely result in guidance on desired tone/content. In addition, know the publication: how and when did they last cover the topic, and how does your piece fit into ongoing conversation.
5. Forget objectivity. Particularly important for op-ed; have opinion, take perspective, be passionate.
6. Wear expertise on sleeve. Authority matters; this is not the time to be shy about your and your organization's credentials and experience. Ideally, tie expertise to this community.
7. Make it local. Discuss impact on the local community and know the local community's history with the topic.

8. Start with Basics. Do not assume an informed reader; include concise, informative background. Reference the specific article/editorial to which you are responding by date/title.
9. Make a clearly defined point. Make one strong point and back it up with 3–4 supporting points. All of which has a clearly defined point of view coming from unique voice of writer.
10. Avoid jargon. Use accessible language and assume the reader is not an expert in your topic.
11. Respect the publication. Each publication will have a word limit and submission methodology; look these up & abide by the guidelines.
12. Be exclusive. Most publications want an exclusive piece and want it to be exclusive from time of submission (i.e., do not send to multiple outlets).
13. Carefully structure.
For op-eds: Grab readers with first sentence & paragraph (e.g., an interesting story, example or quote); in supporting paragraphs build on lead with facts, statistics and research; wrap up with what needs to be done next/ issue a call to action. When starting ask: what is the clear point I want to make? Who cares & are they a part of the readership?
For letters to the editor: Clearly introduce topic and specifically what you’re responding to in 25-50 words; shift into the main content where you express disagreement, identifying something left out of the discussion, or clarify action in 100-150 words. Conclude with a call to action in 25-50 words that is both who should act and what action should be taken.

Information Compiled and Adapted From the Following Resources:

- “And Now a Word from Op-Ed”
<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/01/opinion/01SHIP.html?pagewanted=all>.
- Becker, Amy. “When to Write a Letter to the Editor versus an Op-Ed” <https://www.aauw.org/resource/lets-vs-op-ed/>.
- “Everything You Need to Know to Pitch Your Killer Op-ed” <https://rethinkmedia.org/blog/everything-you-need-know-pitch-your-killer-op-ed>.
- “How to Write a Good Op-Ed: Tips from JPost’s Op-Ed Editor”
<https://www.schusterman.org/roicommunity/blogs/anonymous/how-to-write-a-good-op-ed-tips-from-jposts-op-ed-editor>. “How to Write Op-Ed Columns”
http://www.earth.columbia.edu/sitefiles/file/pressroom/media_outreach/OpEdGuide.doc.
- “Op-Ed Guidelines” <https://www.smith.edu/about-smith/college-relations/news-office/op-ed-guidelines>.
- Stephens, Bret. “Tips for Aspiring Op-Ed Writers” <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/opinion/tips-for-aspiring-op-ed-writers.html>.
- “Tips for Writing an Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor” <https://www.nlc.org/tips-for-writing-an-op-ed-or-letter-to-the-editor>.
- “Tips for Writing Op-eds to Respond to Breaking News” <https://rethinkmedia.org/blog/tips-writing-op-eds-respond-breaking-news>.
- The Op-Ed Project - <http://www.theopedproject.org>.

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