

Tips & Resources on Writing an Op-Ed for USCCR Reports/Memos

Background

An opinion piece or Op-Ed derives its name from originally having appeared opposite the editorial page in a newspaper. Today, the term is used more widely to represent a column that represents the strong, informed, and focused opinion of the writer on an issue of relevance to a targeted audience.

Keep in mind that *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* receive hundreds of submissions per day and publish only a handful of the best. There is no guarantee yours will be chosen. You will have a higher chance of publication if you submit your letter to smaller local or regional outlets. Also consider sending submissions to online-only outlets, like *The Huffington Post*, *The Daily Beast* or *Slate*, or radio stations that may read a letter on-air.

Many large national newspapers require that submissions be completely original and “exclusive,” not published in any part by any other outlet before or after. If you’re writing to smaller local news organizations, it may be permissible to submit an “open letter,” one that has been offered to multiple outlets. Your submission will likely need to be a national issue or a local issue garnering national attention to have a chance at being selected for a national publication. If your piece focuses more on a local issue, don’t waste time submitting it to huge outlets.

Common characteristics of op-eds:

Though each news organization has slightly different policies about specific requirements, keep the following tips in mind:

- Be concise. Most publications request op-eds in the 500-750-word range. *Eliminate needless words and phrases like “I believe” and “the fact that.”*
- Editors will welcome pieces that add new information and are fun to read. Feel free to cite USCCR reports and other data, but don't let that stop your personality and humor from shining through.
- Offer a clear solution or call to action.
- Avoid jargon, acronyms, bold text, excessive capitalization, exaggerations, and combative language.
- Typically, it is short, between 500 and 750 words.
- It has a clearly defined point.
- It has a clearly defined point of view.
- It represents clarity of thinking.
- It contains the strong, distinctive voice of the writer.

Questions to ask yourself when writing an op-ed or column:

- Do I have a clear point to make? If so, what is it?
- Who cares? (Writing with a particular audience in mind can inform how you execute your column. Who is it that you are trying to convince? Why are you targeting that specific reader?)
- Is there substance to my argument?

Here are some examples of op-eds that are relevant to draw from:

- *Here is a perfect example* of one from the Commission's former chair, Catherine E. Lhamon: <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-the-haunting-reality-of-discrimination-in-school-discipline/2019/07> - She ties in the USCCR report and everything!
- This one is from Reps Talib and Dingell - this speaks to our MA SAC report on Water Affordability: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/02/15/tlaib-dingell-clean-water-act/>
- Here is one from the Chair and a Member of the Oklahoma Advisory Committee regarding their 2021 Racial Disparities in Policing Report for the Commission (Ang helped edit and place this piece): <https://tulsaworld.com/opinion/columnists/opinion->

[oklahoma-advisory-committee-to-the-u-s-commission-on-civil-rights-issues-advisory-memorandum/article fe77e1f2-c313-11eb-b9d9-e72cee5b022a.html](https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2014/07/24/oklahoma-advisory-committee-to-the-u-s-commission-on-civil-rights-issues-advisory-memorandum/article-fe77e1f2-c313-11eb-b9d9-e72cee5b022a.html)

Important Elements of the Op-Ed:

Topic and theme

Every successful op-ed piece or column must have a clearly defined topic and theme.

- The topic is the person, place, issue, incident, or thing that is the primary focus of the column. The topic is usually stated in the first paragraph.
- The theme is the big, overarching idea of the column. What's your point in writing about the chosen topic and why is it important? The theme may appear early in the piece, or it may appear later when it may also serve as a turning point into a deeper level of argument.

Voice

Having a strong voice is critical to a successful column or op-ed piece. Columns are most typically conversational in tone, so you can imagine yourself have a conversation with your reader as you write (a short, focused conversation). But the range of voice used in columns can be wide: contemplative, conversational, descriptive, experienced, informative, informed, introspective, observant, plaintive, reportorial, self-effacing, sophisticated, or humorous, among many other possibilities.

Sometimes what voice you use is driven by the publication for which you are writing. A good method of developing your voice is to get in the practice of reading your column or op-ed out loud. Doing so gives you a clear sense of how your piece might sound – what your voice may come off as – to your intended reader.

Research

While columns and op-ed pieces allow writers to include their own voice and express an opinion, to be successful the columns must be grounded in solid research. Research involves acquiring facts, quotations, citations or data from sources and personal observation. Research also allows a reader to include sensory data (touch, taste, smell, sound, or sight) into a column. There are two basic methods of research:

- Field research: going to the scene, interviews, legwork; primary materials, observations, and knowledge.
- Library, academic, or internet research: using secondary materials, including graphs, charts, and scholarly articles.

Openings and Endings

The first line of an op-ed is crucial. The opening “hook” may grab the reader’s attention with a strong claim, a surprising fact, a metaphor, a mystery, or a counter-intuitive observation that entices the reader into reading more. The opening also briefly lays the foundation for your argument.

Similarly, every good column or op-ed piece needs a strong ending that fulfills some basic requirements. It:

- Echoes or answers introduction.
- Has been foreshadowed by preceding thematic statements.
- Is the last and often most memorable detail.
- Contains a final epiphany or calls the reader to action.

There are two basic types of endings. An “open ending” suggests rather than states a conclusion, while a “closed ending” states rather than suggests a conclusion. The closed ending in which the point of the piece is resolved is by far the most used.

Checklist

Below are some things to remember as you revise your op-ed or column before you submit it for publication. You should always check:

- Clarity.
- Coherence and unity.
- Simplicity.
- Voice and tone. Most are conversational; some require an authoritative voice.
- Direct quotations and paraphrasing for accuracy.
- That you properly credit all sources (though formal citations are not necessary).
- The consistency of your opinion throughout your op-ed or column.

Helpful links and resources:

- Here is a NYT article that has some amazing insights on how to write an op-ed that will get published: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/opinion/tips-for-aspiring-op-ed-writers.html>
- Here are some guidelines too that I find helpful from Harvard: https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hks-communications-program/files/new_seglin_how_to_write_an_oped_1_25_17_7.pdf
- Also, I am here to help and support in any way I can so let me know if jumping on a call would be more fruitful.