



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Writing for the public

Disclaimer: A colleague in University Communications created this, so it's an even uglier PowerPoint



Why write an op-ed?

- Make your ideas known beyond academe
- Have an influence on public policy
- Impact ideas, too!



What is an op-ed?

- An **evidence-based** and **timely** argument that is of public value.
- Op-eds **challenge** popular wisdom, or explore a **different angle** of a widely reported story.
- They offer readers a perspective from the eyes of someone with a unique perspective, or a **someone with expertise in the subject**.



What is an op-ed?

- Above all, op-eds are **personal** and **passionate**.
- They are conversational without being chatty.
- They are told in first person.
- Your topic should be something you could discuss at a dinner party and **hold the attention of non-sociologists**.



What is not an op-ed?

1. It is not news. It is your **opinion**. No need to be objective.
2. It is not a rant. Op-eds require **evidence** to support a claim.
3. It is not a journal article. No jargon, **no pedagogy**.



The nitty-gritty

Op-eds are generally short. Aim for about **750 words**.

Some outlets will allow for longer pieces, but still usually no more than 1,200 to 1,500 words.

The process for submitting varies, but most outlets want electronic submission, either by email or through web forms.



The nitty-gritty

1. Write the op-ed and submit. You can't pitch an idea.
2. Don't send attachments. Copy op-ed into text of email.
3. Send to only one media outlet at a time.
4. Most major outlets will only respond if they are accepting your op-ed.
5. If you don't hear within 3 days, move on.



Provocation **I**nformation **E**xhortation



Provocation

The introduction to your op-ed, where you grab the reader's attention with an **interesting and provocative** statement. Less than a quarter of your op-ed.



Provocation

“The American public has a right and a responsibility to be concerned about the safety, nutrition and quality of our nation's food. It is only natural that we look to the news media and our network of friends and family to help inform our choices.

Unfortunately, the debate over lean, finely textured beef (LFTB) has been grossly distorted by careless and deliberate misinformation, which has spread like wildfire. The news media's use of the term "pink slime" has been inflammatory and entirely inaccurate — and has done the public a disservice.

As one who has dedicated my career to food safety, I want to take the opportunity to inform the American public that LFTB is 100% beef, plain and simple.”

Russell Cross (animal science professor), USA Today, April 1, 2012



Information

This is where you sell your idea, present your arguments, show your facts, explain what is happening.

Don't get **bogged down in details** or minutiae! This still needs to be **interesting** to the reader.

About half of the op-ed.



Information

“Although there are some who call for labeling this safe and nutritious food product, the fact is, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recognizes that this product is what it is: 100% beef. There is no need for labeling LFTB — because nothing is being added that is not beef.

Some have also raised questions about the use of ammonium hydroxide as a safety precaution, and whether its use should be included on food packaging labels.

Following an E. coli outbreak in 1993, the U.S. beef industry has devoted hundreds of millions of dollars to developing processes that produce safe food. This included the addition of pathogen reduction interventions such as hot water, lactic acid and others. The use of ammonia is another example of a pathogen intervention.

Neither the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) nor USDA thinks it should be labeled because it is what they call a "processing aid." I agree. The residual level is very low, but has a very positive effect on food safety.”

Russell Cross, USA Today, April 1, 2012



Exhortation

The conclusion, where you tell readers the impact on their lives, **why it matters** and, if appropriate, how they can take action.

A quarter or less of the op-ed.



Exhortation

Many op-eds start out strong, build a good case, and then just **flame out** in mushy platitudes.

Leave the reader with a **sense of purpose**, an idea to advocate or an action to take.



Exhortation

“What the public needs to know is that because of this situation, about 13 pounds of quality beef per animal now will be wasted. We'd need to raise an additional 1.5 million cattle each year to make up for this loss. The price of the raw material for ground beef has increased more than 15% in the past few weeks. Guess who will get to pay for the increase? The consumer.”

Russell Cross, USA Today, April 1, 2012



Another way of writing for the public:

Analysis or Perspective articles



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Scott Shackelford, Indiana University; Christina Cochran, Indiana University; David Basco, Indiana University; and Katy Kultima, Indiana University

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Maggie Bryson, University of Tennessee

Stopping the cancer cells that thrive on chemotherapy – research into how pancreatic tumors adapt to stress could lead to a new treatment approach

Changsheng Wu, University of California, San Diego; David Chensue, University of California, San Diego; and Leah Weiss, University of California, San Diego

Moderna's experimental cancer vaccine treats but doesn't prevent melanoma – a biochemist explains how it works

Mark R. Orlow, University of Buffalo





What is *The Conversation*?

- Scholars explain their research and why it matters to a public audience
- Or they **use their expertise** to explain societal issues
- “Academic rigor, journalistic flair”
- Nonprofit: No commercial, political or lobbying influence
- Free to Republish – Free to Read



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The Atlantic **The New York Times**





Writing for *The Conversation* is different than writing an op-ed

- Analysis, not opinion.
- Statements backed up with evidence in hyperlinks.
- Pitch ideas: Don't submit completed articles.



Questions?