

NEWSPAPER OPINION

A newspaper consists mostly of news articles, which present factual overviews of current events. In a good news article, those facts are reported without bias, and opinions expressed through quotes from a spokesperson on one side of a controversial issue should be balanced by quotes from spokespersons on the other side.

But most newspapers also have an “opinion” section, consisting entirely of, well, opinions. Most larger newspapers maintain separation between the “news editors” who help reporters craft news articles, and “opinion editors,” who write commentaries from the perspective of the newspaper’s “editorial board” and choose which reader commentaries to print.

ANATOMY OF THE OPINION PAGE

A complete opinion page includes three major elements:

1. **Editorials** – These are commentaries, of varying lengths but rarely shorter than 500 words for a major regional newspaper, from the perspective of the newspaper’s editorial board. Sometimes authored collectively as “Editorial Board,” and other times by individuals, they represent the collective views of a body that includes newspaper staff and, in some cases, the paper’s publisher. It is unusual for an editorial to comment on an issue not previously covered by the paper’s reporting staff.
2. **Op-Eds** – These reader commentaries were traditionally printed opposite the editorial page (hence the name) and generally express views different from those of the editorial board. Note that this sometimes means opposing the editorial board’s established position, but it often means raising an issue not previously covered by the paper at all. This makes op-eds effective tools to showcase issues on which local news coverage is unlikely. For most regional newspapers, op-eds should not exceed 650 words.
3. **Letters to the Editor** – These reader commentaries are typically capped by regional newspapers at 150-200 words. Unlike an op-ed, letters to the editor (often abbreviated LTEs) must typically respond to a specific article appearing recently in the paper. They generally offer a perspective not reflected in the article, expand on an element in the article, or contradict a factual finding or spokesperson’s assertion from the article.

WRITING BEST PRACTICES

Keep a close eye on the word count. Editorial teams are typically understaffed, so they are less likely to print a commentary they must edit for length, even if they value the content. State your opinion upfront. Make one main point, and use it as an editorial tool to evaluate supporting points. Use data and facts wisely, to support a well-articulated argument, not simply to share information. Remember, information is for the news sections of the paper, and you are writing for the opinion page.

It is worth noting that, while most readers seeking to influence a paper’s coverage of an issue of concern will write op-eds or letters to the editor, advocacy organizations often ask editorial boards to consider publishing editorials offering a specific point of view. This request is made in writing, through an “editorial board memo,” or (less-frequently, in recent years, as newsroom staffs have declined) in-person, during an “editorial board meeting.”

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OPINION PITCHING

Best practices for pitching for editorial boards are similar to those applicable to pitching reporters:

Lead with the value-add. Commentary serves to make the news more accurate or more engaging. If your letter corrects an error or builds on a theme introduced by an article, your pitch note should lead with that. If your op-ed introduces a new idea, say so upfront – then quickly pivot to show the editor why the paper’s readers will value the new conversation.

Connect your commentary to their coverage. Letters to the editor must typically relate to a specific article. And while op-eds offer more topical freedom, your pitch will be more effective if you can show the editors that you have paid attention to their paper’s coverage of similar or related issues.

Keep it local. Most newspapers and broadcast stations serve a specific local area, so editors always have local audiences in mind. Including locally-relevant data or references will help editors see how your commentary will connect with their readers.

Short and casual. Your pitch should be short – 15 seconds if spoken casually aloud is about right. Your commentary should speak for itself, for the most part.

Make their job easy. Always include your name, phone number, and email. In fact, review each paper’s submission requirements before you make your pitch, and follow them to the letter. And, if an editor calls to decline your op-ed but invites you to submit a letter to the editor (or vice-versa) on the issue, say yes – then do it!

Take no for an answer. There are a thousand reasons a well-reasoned, well-written commentary might not be published. If you get an email or a phone call declining to print your commentary, the editor may offer a word or two by way of explanation (already printed several responses to that article, not really a new perspective, editorial focus has moved on to a new issue, etc.). If he or she doesn’t, it’s OK to ask for any tips they might offer for the future, but if nothing is forthcoming, thank the editor and move on to the next opportunity.