Guidelines on Writing Op-Eds to News Editors

Public service advertisements (sometimes called public service announcements) or PSAs are effective ways of using Op-Eds to the Editor are short articles in a newspaper’s Editorial Section. Op-Eds are usually about 700-800 words long. An Op-Ed is a public opinion. Op-Eds to the Editor can be very useful tools to get your message out.

- Most policymakers read these religiously; it is an important way for elected officials to track issues important to their constituents.
- It is a free way to address public opinion.
- They are your words, your message. No misquoting, no chance that the reporter will miss your point (or come to his own).
- You can make connections to policy issues otherwise not addressed in traditional news.
- If your issue is not getting press, or is now “old news”, an article can revive the issue.

How to write an Op-Ed to the Editor:

- Plan your message. Choose just one topic, don’t try to pack too much in. If you have a different take or a unique perspective on an issue, it is more likely to be published.
- Choose your target. If you are trying to move public opinion, look for the paper with the largest circulation. If you want to reach a particular legislator, choose his hometown paper or one you know that he reads.
- Start writing.
  - Keep it as short as possible. When they say 800 words, they mean it. The most common reason that articles are not published is because they are too long.
  - Be clear. Big words and lots of statistics do not score more points, they just lose the reader.
  - Be direct. Don’t use sarcasm or hypothetical questions. Don’t make them guess what your point is.
  - Real life stories engage readers and can often make a point in far fewer words than a page of statistics.
  - Choose words carefully. Do not offend. No personal attacks. Do nothing that detracts the reader from your point.
  - Explain your stake in the issue up front.
  - It can be effective if you bring up your opponents’ case and prove it wrong. If you can’t, don’t include it.
  - Offer readers action steps, if possible.
  - Include your name, address, a phone number where you can be reached, any organizational affiliation, and a one-sentence description of that organization. You definitely do not have to be writing on behalf of an organization to get published.
- Triple check your facts.
- Ask a colleague to read it over to check for errors and to be sure it is understandable and engaging.
- If you do get published, save the clipping. Send it to policymakers in case they didn’t see it.

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