Op-Ed Tips and Examples

Getting Ready:
An op-ed is short for opinion-editorial. Some are written by journalists and some are submitted by the general public.

An op-ed is a journalism tool used by the general public to express an opinion or share ideas about a timely and specific issue. The goal of an op-ed is to get people interested in your issue in the hopes that they might become involved in your cause.

It is always a good idea to contact the newspaper you are aiming for in advance. Call or email the editor of the op-ed section, introduce yourself and pitch your idea for an op-ed. Be receptive to any advice; this person is an expert on op-eds.

You can send a submission to more than one newspaper, but not in the same ‘market.’ That is, do not send the same article to two national newspapers. It is however acceptable to submit your article to several local newspapers that circulate in different areas.

Send your submission at least ten to fourteen days before you would like it to appear in the media.

Ask your organization if you can sign the article on behalf of your organization. This will add credibility and strength to your message.

Writing the Article:
Assume the reader is new to this topic; explain any terminology and concepts. Keep in mind that you are trying to reach the general public regarding your opinions and issues.

Be brief, clear and to the point. Be professional, yet maintain a conversational style.

Don’t say things just to say them; be clear and unequivocal. For example, if you need to explain the previous sentence, rework that sentence to avoid the explanation entirely.

Use a simple structure; express your opinion, use facts and an example or statistics to back it up, mention the event in question and conclude. The article should flow easily.
The text should be no longer than two pages, single spaced. The average op-ed ranges from 600-800 words, but newspapers have different requirements. Submissions may be edited for length. A rule of thumb is that the less there is to take out, the less the editor will want to take out.

Your submission should focus on one specific area.

The title of the op-ed must catch the reader’s attention. A good title will make the reader want to read the entire article; a bad title will make them move on to the next article.

Your first paragraph is the most important. This is where the reader will decide to read the whole thing or move on. Therefore, emphasizes your main point here; the reader is more likely to read the entire article if you hook them in the beginning. You should be able to do so in two sentences.

As much as you can, support your ideas with facts and statistics. Remember to cite your sources.

Your last paragraph summarizes your point and leaves room for the reader to remain interested in your issues. Make the reader want more information from your organization and cause. Include a paragraph at the end on who you are (your title and role in your organization) and your contact information (e-mail and phone).

Include a Letter:
With your submission, include a letter (on agency letterhead) explaining who you are and why you are submitting an article. Include your complete contact information (address, phone numbers, fax and email address).

If the event you are trying to promote is time sensitive, include such information in the letter. For example, “This article was written partially in light of the upcoming Suicide Prevention Week from September 10th to 16th.” This will help the editor determine when to put it to print.

If you are sending your submission to only one newspaper, emphasize the point theirs is the only one in that market that has received such a submission. If you have sent the same submission to more than one newspaper, simply state that this article was also submitted as such and to other newspapers.

Be open to the fact that the editor might send your article back in order for you to shorten or revise it and then resubmit it. The editor can also edit your article or title at his/her wish. Do not be surprised if there are changes. A simple and clear submission will avoid such editing.
Sample Op-Ed

Here’s a little-known fact about suicide prevention: For far too long, many in the mental health field have been scared of suicidal people.

Under the old-fashioned way of thinking, it’s been considered dangerous to have people who’ve survived suicide attempts or suicidal thinking get together in something as simple as support groups, for fear that they would make each other worse or even refine methods to try again. The very few people who stood up and spoke publicly about their experience with suicidal thinking were watched with concern.

But that mindset is changing quickly, with a number of historic developments this year alone. A determined effort by a growing community of suicide attempt survivors is leading the mental health field to take a new look at a population that, while at the highest risk for suicide, has long been misunderstood.

One reason for misunderstandings is this: Just two states, Kentucky and Washington, require that mental health professionals be trained in suicide prevention. Most psychiatrists, therapists and social workers get little to no formal training in working with suicidal people, according to a striking 2012 report by the American Association of Suicidology (AAS), the country’s oldest suicide prevention group. How many professionals in other fields can say they aren’t trained in the worst-case scenario?

This situation has prolonged the culture of fear that has kept us from talking about suicide, one of the top 10 causes of death in this country, from a crucial point of view: that of the people who know what being suicidal feels like.

This emerging community is trying to tell us as best as they know how. In perhaps the most striking project, Live Through This, a young Brooklyn photographer challenges us with dozens of portraits of attempt survivors across the country. Each gazes into the camera, daring us to dismiss him or her as “the other.”

Other attempt survivors _ tech workers, journalists, artists, parents, grad students, mental health workers _ are pressing for systems change. This year, AAS made history by creating a division for people who’ve been suicidal, after a spirited grassroots campaign. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has started a national series of focus groups to explore how it can engage people who’ve been suicidal.

And an Academy Award-winning documentary team has turned its focus on attempt survivors for its next project, “The S Word.” For every death by suicide, there are dozens of people who survive an attempt. Who are they? Or perhaps more accurately, who are we?
These days, people who once shrank from the idea of suicidal thinking are hustling to keep pace with the changing times.

The U.S. has received quite the road map, too. The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, the public-private partnership tasked with carrying out the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, this summer released a groundbreaking report by its attempt survivor task force. The report, The Way Forward, addresses everything from police response to a suicidal crisis to the alarming practice of expelling or otherwise punishing students who’ve been suicidal. It demands peer support, training for mental health professionals, resources for loved ones and much more.

In short, people who’ve been suicidal are saying they need inclusion, respect and care _ real care.

Now the task in the mental health field _ indeed, the health field at large _ is to show leadership and persuade the public that we can talk about suicidal thinking, that this pervasive taboo must come to an end. The chances are quite good that each one of us knows and loves someone who has been suicidal, but chances are also good that the person has never dared say so. For the record, that silence is over. Just as people once whispered about cancer, we will one day look back in wonder that we ever whispered about this.

(Links:)
Just two states:  

Brooklyn photographer: http://livethroughthis.org/

New AAS division:  

“The S Word:” http://attemptsurvivors.com/2014/06/16/to-boldly-talk-about-suicide/

The Way Forward:  
http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org/task-force/suicide-attempt-survivors