

Assignments to use your voice: Craft a climate op-ed

Assignment

Write a tight, persuasive essay in the style of an op-ed. This piece will be an opportunity for you to use your unique voice to take a stance on a timely topic related to the climate crisis. (Suggested length: 800–1200 words)

Learning objective

Develop knowledge of and skill in effective public communication through op-ed writing – bringing *your* voice to life.

Tips for educators

- We suggest using two class sessions to support this assignment:
 - Class session 1: (A) help students understand the form of op-eds and (B) brainstorm op-ed topics.
 - Class session 2: workshop students' draft op-eds.
- If you're teaching the entirety of *All We Can Save*, this assignment works well following the "Reframe" section or at midterm.
- You may want to encourage students to submit their op-eds to a school, local, or national newspaper or online publication.

Gratitude and credit

The OpEd Project has trained thousands of people, including some on our team, and this assignment is inspired and informed by that training. [Learn more about their work.](#)

Understanding the form of op-eds

Materials to introduce the form generally

** to read/watch before class*

[Writing and Placing Op-Eds](#) by Carol Anderson (video)

[Writing and Submitting Op-Eds](#) by Bina Venkataraman (video)

[Op-ed Writing: Tips and Tricks](#) from The OpEd Project (webpage)

Classroom content

- **Discuss:** What did you learn about op-eds from Anderson, Venkataraman, and the OpEd Project?
- **Review:** What makes for a good op-ed?
- **Review:** What's a typical op-ed structure?

What makes for a good op-ed?

1. Author believes they have something **worth saying**.
2. Author has **credibility** – reasons for readers to trust them.
3. Author knows **why** they're saying it. Their **values** come through.
4. Piece draws **connections** – to something else on the reader's mind.
5. **Logic** is strong and shored up with **evidence**.
6. Plain, clear language makes it **accessible** – especially to non-experts.
7. Piece says something new and conveys a clear, actionable "**so what.**"

What's a typical op-ed structure?

* *These are guidelines, not a recipe*

- **Lede:** opening sentence/paragraph; often connected to a news hook
- **Thesis:** statement of argument
- **Argument**
 - 1st point (evidence, evidence, conclusion)
 - 2nd point
 - 3rd point
- **“To be sure”:** preempt critics, acknowledge flaws/counter arguments
 - Step into shoes of the person with whom you disagree and assume the best about their mind and heart
 - Strategies for addressing anticipated critique:
 - Acknowledge and dismiss it
 - Validate and trump it
 - Make a personal caveat about it
- **Conclusion:** often circling back to lede; specific + doable (e.g., “if more people... then...”)

Sample op-eds to illustrate the form in practice

* *To read before class*

Think This Pandemic Is Bad? We Have Another Crisis Coming by Rhiana Gunn-Wright

I work in the environmental movement. I don't care if you recycle by Mary Annaïse Heglar

I'm a black climate expert. Racism derails our efforts to save the planet by Ayana Elizabeth Johnson

How Much of Harvard's \$40 Billion Endowment Is Invested in Fossil Fuels? by Devi Lockwood (*note that Harvard has now committed to divestment*)

We Need Courage, Not Hope, to Face Climate Change by Kate Marvel

Call climate change what it is: violence by Rebecca Solnit

Classroom exercise

To familiarize yourself with op-ed writing, get into small groups and re-read one of the sample op-eds. On your own, free write reflections in response to the following questions. Then, come together in small groups of three to discuss.

- What is the author's lede?
- What is the author's thesis and how do they present their argument?
- What makes this op-ed credible? What background information or research is essential for the author to communicate their message?
- Does the author preempt potential critique? How?
- Does the author present a clear, actionable, "so what?" If so, what is it?

Brainstorming op-ed topics

Reflection questions

* *For free writing and/or class discussion*

- What aspect of the climate crisis, the climate conversation, the climate movement, or climate solutions has your attention right now? Why?
- Are there current events (local, national) that you've found yourself thinking about or discussing that are in some way related to climate?
- What have you heard/read/seen recently that tugged at your heartstrings? Or made you angry? What's at the root of those reactions?
- Is there a particular point of view related to climate that you want to challenge or upend? Maybe a common way of thinking or a trope that doesn't serve us?
- Is there a climate-related question you're holding, for which you might write your way into more clarity?
- What "piece of the problem is right in front of us" that you want to see addressed?

→ **Next steps: Prepare a draft of your op-ed to be workshopped in small groups.**

Workshopping draft op-eds

Classroom exercise

Break into small groups of three to read each draft op-ed and offer feedback on key points.

As you read and discuss a draft op-ed, consider the following questions

- Does the op-ed address some aspect of the **climate crisis**?
- What really **works well** in this piece?
- Does the author establish **credibility**? Does their **unique voice** come through?
- Is the **lede** compelling for you as a reader?
- Can you clearly state the **main argument**? (Try repeating it back to the author to see...)
- Is the argument supported with **clear points**? Are they logical, tight, and shored up with **evidence**?
- Is there anything in this piece that left you **confused** or **unclear**?
- Are key **counter-arguments** and/or **critics** addressed?
- Is the **conclusion** strong and action-oriented?

→ **Next steps: Use the feedback you received to evolve your draft into a final op-ed.**