HOW TO WRITE AN OP-ED OR COLUMN

An op-ed piece derives its name from originally having appeared opposite the editorial page in a newspaper. Today, the term is used more widely to represent a column that represents the strong, informed, and focused opinion of the writer on an issue of relevance to a targeted audience.

Distinguishing Characteristics of an Op-Ed or Column

Partly, a column is defined by where it appears, but it shares some common characteristics:

- Typically, it is short, between 750 and 800 words.
- It has a clearly defined point.
- It has a clearly defined point of view.
- It represents clarity of thinking.
- It contains the strong, unique voice of the writer.

Questions to Ask Yourself When Writing an Op-Ed or Column

- Do I have a clear point to make?
- What is it?
- Who cares? (Writing with a particular audience in mind can inform how you execute your column. Who is it that you are trying to convince? Why are you targeting that specific reader?)
- Is there substance to my argument?

Topic and Theme

Every successful op-ed piece or column must have a clearly defined topic and theme.

- Topic: the person, place, issue, incident, or thing that is the primary focus of the column. The topic is usually stated in the first paragraph.
- Theme: another level of meaning to the topic. What's the big, overarching idea of the column? What's your point? Why is your point important? The theme may appear early in the piece or it may appear later when it may also serve as a turning point into a deeper level of argument.

Research

While columns and op-ed pieces allow writers to include their own voice and express an opinion, to be successful the columns must be grounded in solid research. Research involves acquiring facts, quotations, citations, or data from sources and personal observation. Research also allows a reader to include sensory data (touch, taste, smell, sound, or sight) into a column. There are two basic methods of research:

- Field research: going to the scene, interviews, legwork; primary materials, observations, and knowledge
- Library, academic, or internet research: using secondary materials, including graphs, charts, and scholarly articles

Openings

The first line of an op-ed is crucial. The opening "hook" may grab the reader's attention with a strong claim, a surprising fact, a metaphor, a mystery, or a counter-intuitive observation that entices the reader into reading more. The opening also briefly lays the foundation for your argument.

Endings

Every good column or op-ed piece needs a strong ending which has some basic requirements. It:

- Echoes or answers introduction
- Has been foreshadowed by preceding thematic statements
- Is the last and often most memorable detail
- Contains a final epiphany or calls the reader to action

There are two basic types of endings. An "open ending" suggests rather than states a conclusion, while a "closed ending" states rather than suggests a conclusion. The closed ending in which the point of the piece is resolved is by far the most commonly used.

Voice

Having a strong voice is critical to a successful column or op-ed piece. Columns are most typically conversational in tone, so you can imagine yourself have a conversation with your reader as you write (a short, focused conversation). But the range of voice used in columns can be wide: contemplative, conversational, descriptive, experienced, informative, informed, introspective, observant, plaintive, reportorial, self-effacing, sophisticated, humorous, among many other possibilities.

Sometimes what voice you use is driven by the publication for which you are writing. A good method of perfecting your voice is to get in the habit of reading your column or op-ed out loud. Doing so gives you a clear sense of how your piece might sound – what your voice may come off as – to your intended reader.

Revision Checklist

Some things to remember as you revise your op-ed or column before you submit it for publication:

- Check clarity.
- Check coherence and unity.
- Check simplicity.
- Check voice and tone. (Most are conversational; some require an authoritative voice.)
- Check direct quotations and paraphrasing for accuracy.
- Check to make sure you properly credit all sources though formal citations are not necessary.)
- Check the consistency of your opinion throughout your op-ed or column.

Resources

Below are links to some online resources related to op-ed and column writing:

The Op-Ed Project (http://www.theopedproject.org) is a terrific resource for anyone looking to strengthen their op-ed writing. It provides tips on op-ed writing, suggestions about basic op-ed structure, guidelines on how to pitch op-ed pieces to publications, and information about top outlets that publish op-eds. Started as an effort to increase the number of women op-ed writers, The Op-Ed Project also regularly runs daylong seminars around the country.

"How to Write an Op-Ed Article" (http://newsoffice.duke.edu/duke_resources/oped), which was prepared by David Jarmul, Duke's associate vice president for news and communications, provides great guidelines on how to write a successful op-ed.

"How to Write Op-Ed Columns" (http://www.earth.columbia.edu/sitefiles/file/pressroom/media_outreach/OpEdGuide.doc), which was prepared by The Earth Institute at Columbia University, is another useful guide to writing op-eds. It contains a useful list of op-ed guidelines for top-circulation newspapers in the U.S.

"And Now a Word from Op-Ed" (http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/01/opinion/01SHIP.html?pagewanted=all) offers some advice on how to think about and write op-eds from the Op-Ed editor of *The New York Times.*

The Harvard Kennedy School Communications Program regularly runs workshops on writing op-eds and columns as well as classes focusing on the topic. You can find out more about these by checking the HKS Communications Program's website (http://www.hkscommunicationsprogram.org).