

How to Write an Op-Ed and Letter to the Editor

GUIDE TO EDITORIAL PLACEMENT

Most newspapers feature an “Op-Ed” and “Letters to the Editor” section in which readers and public figures can express viewpoints and/or respond to particular news events. An Op-Ed is generally a short (600 – 750 words) article expressing an opinion or viewpoint on a timely news topic. A letter to the editor is a very short (150 – 200 words) response to an article that recently appeared in the publication.

The Op-Ed and Letters to the Editor sections are among the most widely read sections of the newspaper. Publication of an op-ed or letter will assure your views will reach many people.

OP-EDS

The following pointers will help you get your op-ed piece published:

- **Find a timely news hook.** Editors need a reason why your viewpoint should be given attention right now. The release of a significant study by PNHP or some other source, annual events (such as new health spending figures or the yearly release of the number of uninsured), or responses to recently published articles are all good reasons.
- **Know the word limit.** Newspapers have limited space, and editors don’t have the time to cut your piece down to size. In general, 600 to 750 words will do, but check the paper’s online opinion page to find out its submission guidelines. A fairly up-to-date list of such guidelines (for the top 100 papers in the country) can be found at bit.ly/cacVBi, a valuable but slow-loading page from The Op-Ed Project (www.theopedproject.org).
- **Make a single point.** You only have 600 to 750 words. Make one point clearly and persuasively.
- **Use short paragraphs.** Make sure there’s a space between each paragraph. Avoid complex sentences.
- **Avoid jargon.** Simple language ensures that all readers, even non-experts, can understand your point. For example, don’t use acronyms or “policy wonk” language.
- **“Humanize” your article.** Illustrations, anecdotes and personal stories help explain and bring complicated issues to life. Think about your personal experiences as a physician in the community or as a physician-in-training and how a single-payer system would improve things.
- **Make a specific recommendation.** This is an opinion piece. State your opinion on how to improve matters.

- **Draw the reader in, but get to the point.** Your first paragraph should draw the reader in by using a dramatic vignette or a well-stated argument. If you choose to open with an anecdote or other device, make sure you quickly get to the point.
 - **End with a bang.** Your final paragraph is as important as your opening paragraph. Be sure to summarize your argument in one strong final paragraph.
 - **Provide your contact information.** List your name, address, phone, fax and e-mail contact information at the bottom of the piece.
 - **Submit your op-ed via e-mail, as a rule.** Copy and paste the text of your op-ed into the body of an e-mail message. Don't send it as an attachment. Instructions for submitting an op-ed are usually on the opinion page of the paper's website. Most papers like them e-mailed. For detailed instructions, see bit.ly/cacVBi.
 - **Follow up.** Most op-ed editors will respond to you within a week. If you haven't heard back from them by then or if your piece is particularly time-sensitive, you can follow up with an e-mail message or phone call to ask if it was received and ask about its status.
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

These tips will help:

- **Make one clear argument.** The piece should be in favor of or critical of a particular position taken by the paper or described in an article.
- **Be specific.** The letter should focus on a specific issue that was raised in an article or opinion piece.
- **Cite the article.** Be sure to mention the title and date of the article you're responding to in one of your first two sentences. For example "Dear editor, Your recent coverage of the issue of the uninsured ("Health care in America," May 11, 2012) was a thoughtful piece..."
- **Be brief.** Generally, 150 to 200 words in three to four paragraphs are ideal. If you can't contain the letter to that length, consider asking someone to help you edit it or write a 700-word op-ed instead.
- **Follow up.** If you have sent your letter to the editor and haven't heard anything within a week, feel free to send a note or make a follow-up call to check on its status. Be aware that editors receive hundreds of letters and may not respond to you immediately, if at all.

You must include your name, address and daytime phone number in your letter. Instructions for submitting a letter to the editor are usually at the bottom of the page where they appear or on the paper's website. Find out from your local paper the best way to send a letter. Most prefer e-mail. A handy summary of the submission guidelines of the country's top 100 papers can be found at bit.ly/cacVBi.