

How To Write Op-Eds

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- 1. Start out with a very clear idea in your own mind about the point you want to make.** It doesn't have to be quite reducible to a bumper sticker, although that might help. Somebody should come away remembering the central point of your essay, and that's possible only if there is a central point.
- 2. Don't choose a topic, choose an argument.** In other words, don't select a topic and make various points about it—that's a term paper, not a column. Rather, start with a contentious argument that you want to persuade people of. What makes you mad or frustrated? That's probably something you care about, and your passion will shine through. And it should be something that people might disagree with or take the opposite view; "businesses should obey the law" isn't an interesting argument because no one would openly make the opposite argument.
- 3. Start with a bang. You're fighting for readers,** and frankly most probably aren't going to read what you have to say. Even in a newspaper opinion page, very few people read every column and op-ed to the bottom. They'll look at the headline and the first half of the first paragraph—and then plenty of them will move on. So don't take time to clear your throat.
- 4. Personal stories are often very powerful to make a point.** It can be your story or someone else's, although it's often most compelling if there's a personal connection. You're much better off telling one person's story, or perhaps two, than five. Numbers are important back-up, though, because the plural of anecdote is not trend!
- 5. If the platform allows it, use photos or video or music or whatever.** Surprise people. The Web allows all kinds of ornaments, and they draw in readers.
- 6. Don't feel the need to be formal and stodgy.** Think of an opinion piece as a letter to a friend, rather than as a formal university essay. Crack a joke. Use quotes. Or even sentence fragments.
- 7. Acknowledge shortcomings in your arguments** if the readers are likely to be aware of them, and address them openly. It's fine to note that there are legitimate counter-arguments, or uncertainty about what will happen, but that you still stand by your argument.
- 8. It's often useful to cite an example of what you're criticizing,** or quote from an antagonist, because it clarifies what you're against.
- 9. If you're really trying to persuade people who are on the fence, remember that their way of thinking may not be yours.** Advocates often cite the arguments that they themselves find most persuasive, rather than those that those in the middle might favor. It's fine to pound the table and make the maximalist argument, but that's less likely to persuade others.
- 10. When your work is published, spread the word through social media or emails** or any other avenue you can think of. The point of writing is not just to exist; it's to be read.