

Op-Ed Pieces

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INTRODUCTION

An op-ed is an opinion piece written on a topic that is relevant to the newspaper's audience. Depending on the newspaper, the topics of op-eds can range from hotly debated national issues to a problem only important to the readers of a small town newspaper. The term 'op-ed' is from combining the words 'opposite' and 'editorial.' This was formed due to the fact that opinion articles traditionally were placed opposite the editorial page. Op-ed articles have evolved into pieces in which the writer claims a viewpoint, tries to persuade you into agreeing with their viewpoint, and then offers ways to resolve the issue.

WHAT QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU BEGIN WRITING

Before you sit down to put words to a page, there are some very important questions you need to ask yourself that will allow you to properly communicate your ideas in the form of an op-ed piece. The first and foremost question you need to ask yourself is "what is the opinion that I am going to represent?" Once you have this question answered the next steps can begin. It is very important to keep this answer in your mind throughout this writing experience, as nearly every design decision you make will have its roots in this answer.

Questions:

- **Is the issue you want to write about a recognized recent issue? Is it timely?**
- **What do you want to convince your audience to believe about this issue?**
- **Who is your audience?**
- **How are you going to connect to that audience?**

After you decide which opinion you wish to represent, you need to decide what is the audience you are trying to write for. Are you going to write for a high-school newspaper, or are you writing for The New York Times? Are you focusing your arguments towards a specific group of people, or are you attempting to appeal to as large an audience as possible? The answers to these questions will have a direct bearing on what kinds of rhetorical appeals you will be using. Knowing your audience will allow you to bring the most appealing arguments to bear, and will increase your success tremendously because you will have a better understanding of how to appeal to your particular reader.

WAYS TO CONNECT WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

Once you have your topic in mind and know to whom you are writing, you can start thinking about how you are going to connect with that audience. As stated, knowing what you wish to argue and knowing who your audience will be are integral in writing an op-ed piece. Without knowing who you are speaking to you will have trouble connecting to your specific audience, and if you have trouble making a connection you will have trouble bringing them over to your side.

- **Open your piece with something that will hook your audience**
- **State known information and then draw from that known information to present new information**
- **Begin with a question that entices the reader to read on**
- **The first sentence should reveal exactly what you intend to talk about**

Known-New Contract: Stating known information (our country consists of many different backgrounds) leads directly into new information (the number of undocumented immigrants). From the appendix:

For a country formed by a mixture of immigrants, when is one more too much?
There are an estimated 10-12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States.

So how do you connect to your audience? It is important to start off on the right foot. If your readership does not encounter something interesting quickly to address the question they are asking, specifically “why am I reading this piece?” then they will put your op-ed down and you will have failed in your attempt to convince them of your opinion. The best way to grab their attention is with some kind of a hook, something that reaches out and makes them want to continue reading. A shocking revelation or a statement can suffice. A sentence that seems counterintuitive and requires some sort of explanation can also engage a reader to begin asking questions and wanting to learn the answers. What is important is that you give your reader something to latch onto that gives a good reason to continue exploring your opinion. Keeping in mind your audience, it is important to tailor your hook to your readership. If you are writing for a very formal audience, then the shocking nature of the hook should be kept to a minimum and the attempt should be to engage the reader’s curiosity through a more intellectual means.

The Hook: When crafting a hook for your piece, use gripping language (preyed upon, unscrupulous, fragile) to increase the effect. From the appendix:

Not only are we taken advantage of, but they too are preyed upon by the unscrupulous who exploit them through their labor and fragile status.

Once your audience has been grabbed by the hook, your next goal is to maintain the audience’s attention while drawing them further emotionally into your piece. Appeals to pathos are one of the very best ways to connect with an audience at this phase. Strong emotional

concepts with strong connotations will do well. Further, the better you know your audience here, the more specific you can get with your appeals to pathos, the harder you can press their emotional buttons. If you are writing to a very general audience, keep your emotional appeals general, and do not use appeals that would alienate a large chunk of your audience in order to grab another part of it.

- **Maintain your audiences attention while drawing them further into your piece**
- **Appeal to strong emotional concepts**
- **Speak about something that directly affects your chosen audience**
- **Do not alienate your audience**
- **Use sentences appropriate to your audience**
- **Avoid confusing terms and jargon**
- **Use appropriate voice that appeals to your specified audience**
- **Establish and maintain credibility through quotes and personal credentials**
- **Filter your chosen issue through your unique point of view**
- **Write your piece through your area of expertise, as a mom, teacher, professor, etc.**

This brings us to the next very important thing to keep in mind while constructing your piece you need to be mindful of not alienating your audience. This might sound like common sense, but if your goal is to bring someone from one point of view to another, then you are going to be addressing a topic that, at first glance, your reader would not deal with had you not made it so appealing with your hook. The point to remember is that you are trying to take the reader on a journey that they do not really want to go on. Thus, you need to make it as easy as possible for them. So while you are writing, you need to keep mindful of the voice you are using. Do not slip into an informal voice while addressing a formal audience, and do not talk down to a less educated one. In essence, use language your audience can relate to and understand. Avoid confusing terms and using too much jargon, as this will put off people not familiar with your subject. This is a case in which knowing your audience well will help you greatly; you can use exactly the jargon your audience knows. This will help you appeal to ethos; your reputation as part of your audience's exact group will draw your audience in even more.

Write to Your Audience: In the case of writing to a prominent newspaper, simple and direct sentences are most effective. Here is an example from the Appendix, short and to the point:

Immigration should not be looked upon as a national threat.

ONCE A CONNECTION IS ESTABLISHED...

Applying to ethos does not end with use of appropriate jargon. Quotes you include in your piece from credible sources will help convince your audience of your own credibility. Furthermore, listing any qualifications you have should be listed, if not in the piece itself then at the end of the piece in a small blurb about the author section. Know your audience and your argument while including these nuggets of wisdom, do not advertise your position on a multinational board of trustees to someone you are trying to convince of tax cuts for big business, it will probably alienate you to the people you need to convince.

About the Author: Give people a bit of information about yourself, such as scholarly affiliations or professional ties. Giving someone a good reason to put faith in your work is a good way to end a piece. From the appendix:

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- **Try and bring the audience over to your viewpoint**
- **Use a strong appeal to logos now that your audience is emotionally involved**
- **You may do this by presenting facts, statistics and/or quotes from professionals**
- **Challenge readers to re-think their opinions on the issue by writing clear arguments backed up with research and a hard-hitting quote**
- **Go beyond focusing on the problem to suggesting alternatives**

Once you have made the strongest connection possible in the short space you have at your disposal, you need to do something with it. This is where appeals to logos are most important. The appeals to pathos and ethos have done the brunt of the work, bringing the audience to a place where they are ready to take the plunge with you. At this point they need something firm to push them over the edge. This is where your well constructed argument comes in. The scope of your piece to some degree dictates what kind of efforts you will have to make in this area. If you weakly appeal to pathos and ethos, you must back up your standing with strong logos. This is another way in which familiarity with you audience will help you greatly. The more you know your audience, the stronger your appeals to pathos will be, the weaker your appeal to logos can be. The ideal situation is one in which your pathos has gripped the audience, but your argument is still based firmly on a valid set of principles. In all honesty though, this isn't always the case in op-ed, and it is important to point this out.

STRUCTURE

Once your argument is constructed and your emotional appeals are worked out, now it is time to shoehorn it all in to 500-700 words. This strict word-count limit exists for two reasons. Historically, these pieces all had to fit into the rigid structuring of the op-ed page of a

newspaper, and page real-estate was hard to come by. In addition, this word-count is about the limit of what would fall into the category of a quick read. In other words, the audience does not have to commit too much when they pick up the piece, and can finish the piece without a large chunk of time being devoted to it.

- **Standard length: 500-700 words**
- **Eliminate passive voice**
- **Include title and byline intended to appeal to wide audience**
- **Include information about author: name, credentials, anything designed to appeal to ethos**
- **May include picture of the author or other graphic representing the issue of the article**

Keeping the word count down requires that you boil down your argument to the three or four most salient points, those with the most emotional and rational impact. The title is an important part of your piece, and should highlight what you believe to be the central theme of your piece. If you are submitting to a large publication, you should include a suggested title so the publication knows what you feel is most important in your piece, but they will in all likelihood change it.

Title: The title of a piece should reflect some key element in your piece and interest your readers in the content. Make sure your title sums your piece well. To do this, it is a good idea to wait until the piece is edited to its final state. From our example in the appendix:

A path to US citizenship to immigrants rescue

Passive voice is something that should be avoided, as the simple declarative sentence will be easier for your audience to read, as well as have a much more direct emotional impact. Further, the simplicity of the structure helps appeal to as wide an audience as possible. When writing to a general newspaper audience, it is important to keep in mind that you are writing to a grade-school reading level. If your audience is more specific than the general public, then catering to their specific reading skills is highly recommended.

SUBMISSION

Submission is the last step in producing an op-ed piece. There are specific rules involved for each publication you will submit to, but there are some specific conventions used when submitting to a newspaper. These guidelines are not for formatting the final product, the newspaper will take care of that. These guidelines are instead meant as a template for your submission to a major newspaper.

- **Double space and use normal format of a professional paper**

- **Provide a suggested title, the author's name and identification**
- **You may want to include a short biographical paragraph about yourself, including residence and experience relevant to the topic**
- **Consider submitting your own original graphic, photo, or art piece to clarify the main topic of your piece**

CONCLUSION

The genre of op-ed is a specific tool used to convince someone of a specific viewpoint. If you use all the tools at your disposal you cannot help but succeed. Strong emotional appeals to pathos through powerful language and stirring images, convincing and supportive appeals to ethos through supporting quotes and author qualifications, and finally a valid and compelling argument appealing to logos are the three keys to success. Knowing your opinion and your audience are the only ways to fully realize your rational appeals, so a firm grasp of these points is likewise indispensable. If you follow this guide closely, you will have no problems.

Appendix A: Example 1

A path to U.S. citizenship to immigrants rescue



By Camille Carleton
Guest Columnist

For a country formed by a soup of immigrants, when is one more too much?

There are an estimated 10-12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. These immigrants are industrious people that have filled in the gaps of employment that Americans have deemed unfit. But for those immigrants who have not found their place in this country, it is our tax dollars that keep them afloat. Many have been able to illegally register for social security yet none pay their dues in taxes. Other immigrants make their existence as part of the shadowy underground economy and have often taken advantage of our medical systems for emergency needs. Not only are we taken advantaged of, but they too are preyed upon by the unscrupulous who exploit them through their labor and fragile status.

There is no doubt that immigration is an urgent national priority. The twelve million people living and working without citizenship, legal security or labor rights not only hurt themselves, but erode the democratic base of society, divide communities and introduce racism and discrimination.

Immigration should not be looked upon as a national threat. It is a problem of labor flows. The only real comprehensive immigration reform is one that accepts the rights of immigrants to obtain their rightful place as members of this nation. But their rightful place should be only considered if they work as any other legalized immigrant has for a

certain amount of years in order to obtain the 'right' to citizenship.

In May of this year the Senate voted to approve a massive immigration reform bill, the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006 (CIRA), S.2611. The act's main concern is this very issue. Should undocumented immigrants who live and work in this country be granted a path to citizenship? This bill addresses this question by covering major features such as a path to legal status, backlog reduction, increased amounts of guest workers, employment verification, all combined with increased interior and border enforcement. It also clarifies that the official language of the United States is to be English, and those immigrants who wish to be granted citizenship must pass an English and civics exam.

For the most part, the CIRA covers all the major issues, the only problem is what to do with the immediate situation of undocumented immigrants in the country now. Those immigrants who are undocumented should first of all have their fingerprints taken. With these fingerprints they can be monitored at the borders as well as filed if necessary in criminal acts. If found to have committed a criminal act before being granted citizenship, the only thing to do is deport the offender back to their country of origin. With these fingerprints, their employers can better document their work for the government to be able to collect appropriate taxes like every other American citizen.

On the borders, I believe with every entrance and departure, whether it be by air, land, or sea, all immigrants should be registered with their fingerprints so their immigration status can be traced



and monitored. With these precautions set, immigrants can be well documented and supervised based on those who are needed or wish, for a set period of time, to work legally in this country.

As a citizen of the United States, I realize that having such control over an individual may be an infringement on their individual rights, but if an immigrant chooses to become a part of this country, it seems a necessary precaution, more so as an economic check rather than a security problem.

With these new precautions, immigrants will be able to further their American experience as legal citizens. Instead of becoming a detriment to American society, immigrants will work to help further our economic success together. With newfound citizenship and previously unattainable lifestyles, the soup that is American culture will continue to be a part of the ever changing society.

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