The Art and Craft of Editorial Writing

Editorials are notoriously difficult to place, but there are ways to increase your chances of getting your piece published. Knowing the basics of editorial writing will make editors take notice and help the organization of your piece to improve readability.

Opinion pieces and letters to the editor are similar in nature but different in purpose. The letter to the editor section is basically a community forum for people to be able to respond to pieces previously published in the paper. They generally address a specific article or editorial and are between 150 and 200 words. An opinion piece, or op-ed, addresses a larger, communal concern or current event. A newspaper editor will often invite a member of the community or expert to submit an op-ed, but unsolicited pieces, usually between 400 and 500 words, are often printed.

Before you begin writing an op-ed, make sure you pick a topic that is timely and important to you. Know the audience you are writing for—whether it is a small community, industry professionals or a national audience. Also have contact information for the opinion editor and be aware of word limits and submission guidelines. By following the paper’s rules and addressing the right person, you have already made inroads with the editor that is looking at your submission.

Organization is key in newspaper writing. The classic structure of an op-ed is introduction, thesis, concession, support, plan and call to action. Some of these sections might take multiple paragraphs while others might only need a sentence or phrase, but all of these elements put together distinguish a good editorial from a rant.

Your introduction is most effective when it is emotionally driven, both for you and the reader. Relaying a personal story or setting up your topic with a current event will help people connect with you and what you’re writing.

The thesis, or claim, of your piece should be a strong statement. This is just about the only time in newspaper writing where it is good to state your opinion as fact. Avoid using be-verbs (am, is, are, was, be), but instead use an action verb like change, implement or enact.

Make the opposition feel validated by consenting to their opinion. This does not mean you have to support their argument, but a debate would not exist if people do not believe that some kind of change is necessary. Don’t dwell on your concession, but show readers you are willing to look at both sides of the issue.

Support your claim with facts. Statistics, specific examples, professional studies and expert opinions all substantiate what you are saying. Pick two or three facts that work best with your ideas. Keep this section fairly short and try not to overwhelm readers with numbers and quotations.

The main purpose of an editorial is to present a plan on how to solve a problem. This should be the focus of your piece, but be careful to avoid using clichés and jargon. Keep your plan simple and straightforward. It should make sense sequentially, but you don’t have to use bullet points or numbers. Be creative in how you present your plan so it stands out from all the other pieces.

Make sure you leave readers with something specific they can do to help. Knowing an individual can make a difference gives readers a sense of hope and excitement. This can be something as simple as writing a letter or as personal as looking closer at one’s belief system, but whatever you are asking a reader to do, make sure it is something you are willing to do as well.

Have faith in your writing and ability to communicate. Just because you are an inexperienced writer doesn’t mean you can’t be an effective one. Let us help you with a piece before you submit it. We can help by making corrections and suggestions to help you get published. The issues we are facing are too important to leave to chance. Together we can change history.
Ten Simple Ways to Look Like a Pro
1. Type a single space at the end of a sentence. Newspapers like to save room, so they don’t double-space.

2. Use rhetorical questions sparingly, if ever. Questions interrupt the flow of a piece and can make it appear that you don’t know the answer to your own question.

3. Avoid exclamation points. Use strong words rather than strong punctuation to show something matters.

4. Write in plain font. Bold, italicized and underlined text doesn’t show up well on newsprint, so newspapers rarely use it.

5. Remove quotation marks from phrases you wish to emphasize. Let your words speak for themselves.

6. Don’t indent points or lists. Newspaper columns are very narrow, and indented points and sub-points waste space.

7. Include a word-count directly under your title and byline. This is something every reporter includes with their submissions.

8. Keep your paragraphs short. A paragraph should only be two or three sentences and shouldn’t exceed five lines in a typed document.

9. Delete transitional phrases such as “My next point” or “In conclusion.” Readers will assume a new paragraph is a new topic and the last paragraph is the conclusion.

10. Spell out numbers below 10, numerate numbers between 10 and 999,999, and use a combination for 1 million and above. However, there are exceptions: Dates, times, decimals and percentages are numerated, and the first and last words of a sentence are spelled out.