



## OP-EDS AND LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### What are op-eds and letters to the editor?

Op-ed stands for “opposite of editorial,” which means in a print newspaper, op-eds traditionally appear on the page facing the editorial page. The editorial page is where the editorial board of the newspaper makes its opinions known, often to endorse political candidates or argue a specific side of an issue. News reporting is supposed to be objective, omitting opinions, but the editorial and op-ed pages are the one place in the news (especially print newspapers) where opinions of both the news source and community members are published. Elected officials and candidates pay close attention to the editorial pages, giving you an opportunity to speak directly to them without the filter of a news story that presents both sides of an issue. Make sure to include your target elected official’s name in your piece whenever possible – either when you identify the issue or in your call to action. This will ensure they see your op-ed or letter and understand it’s relevant to them.

### Op-eds

An op-ed is an argument. It must take a position on an issue and argue the case for that position clearly, and with facts. For your op-ed to be interesting to the editorial page editor, it should have a news hook that makes it timely and relevant to the paper’s readers. Op-eds should be no longer than **650 words**, but your newspaper will also have word count guidelines based on space considerations. Make sure to stick to those parameters – it will make your piece more viable for the paper.

### Letters to the Editor

A Letter to the Editor (LTE) is a very brief statement of your opinion, usually written in response to a recent news article or event. Letters to the editor are meant to give a voice to the average newspaper reader, someone local who has a point of view they want to share with their neighbors. A letter to the editor is much less formal than an op-ed; you don’t need to be an expert on an issue, in fact, you shouldn’t be. You just need to be a local person who cares about the topic. Your LTE should sound the way you talk – straightforward, personal and in plain language.

A successful letter to the editor should be no more than **200 words**, but again, check with your paper for specific word count requirements. It will summarize the issue in two sentences; tell people why they should care; make your argument; and tell people what’s at stake.

### Strategy

Be on the lookout for any news articles or editorials that may warrant a response that can further our campaign work. Your news hook might be a vote that Congress takes or a policy proposal that’s being debated. Your hook could even be a public appearance your member of

Congress made without satisfactorily addressing your issue – or during which they took a strong stand that you support.

To have the biggest impact, there are several elements to consider:

- **Goal of your argument:** In an op-ed or LTE, you state your conclusion first (and last). You make your strongest point up front and then spend the rest of the op-ed making your case with the facts that support it. You will help the issue win converts, gain publicity, and reach the audience of opinion-makers who regularly read the op-ed pages. Remember that an op-ed is not a news story that simply describes a situation; it is your opinion.
- **Timing:** Track the news and jump at opportunities. Timing is essential. Editors want to publish op-eds that relate to issues that are in the news. Whenever possible, therefore, link your issue explicitly to something happening in the news.
- **Audience:** Consider who you want to reach with your op-ed or LTE and tailor your content.
- **News source:** Determine which news source would be best – campus, local, or even national?

## Content

After determining your strategy, refining the content is an essential part of any op-ed or LTE:

- **Structure:** Have a clear editorial viewpoint - come down hard on one side of the issue. Don't equivocate!
  - Be controversial, but not outrageous. An op-ed isn't going to run if it doesn't introduce a new idea. You need to be provocative and add to the conversation.
  - Start with an illustrative example of your big idea. Introduce your topic by painting a picture (see examples) and then launch into the argument. This will grab readers' attention.
  - Focus tightly on one issue or idea - be brief.
  - Express your opinion, then base it on factual, researched or first-hand information. It's ok to use first-person accounts in first-person voice but unless you're telling a personal story, it's generally more effective to avoid using the first-person pronoun ("I.") You're speaking with authority – state your case cleanly. "Healthcare is a human right," is much stronger than "I believe healthcare must be treated as a human right."
  - Provide insight, understanding: educate your reader without preaching.
  - Acknowledge the other side of the argument, then defeat that argument.
  - Near the end, clearly re-state your position and issue a call to action – tell the reader what to do to fix this situation. Lay out a solution, don't just philosophize or merely analyze.
  - Tell readers why they should care. At the end of every few paragraphs, ask out loud: "So what? Who cares?" You need to answer these questions. Explain why. Appeals to self-interest are usually more effective than abstract punditry.
  - Make one point, and make it clear from the beginning. Don't try to cover a whole range of arguments.

- Include a brief bio and your organizational affiliation (SGAC) with the op-ed, along with your website or Twitter handle for readers to learn more.
- **Style:** One of the most important aspects of the op-ed or LTE – grab your readers' attention and hold it!
  - Be personal and conversational; it can help you make your point. No one likes a stuffed shirt.
  - Write with urgency. There are many issues competing for attention. Make sure your argument leaves a reader feeling like your issue is urgent and relevant to them.
  - Be humorous, provided that your topic lends itself to humor. Keep in mind that humor is very contextual and might not work in print the same way it works in person.
  - Have verve, and "fire in the gut" indignation to accompany your logical analysis.
  - Emphasize active verbs and forget the adjectives and adverbs, which only weaken writing.
  - Avoid clichés and jargon. Write out acronyms.
  - Appeal to the average reader. Clarity is paramount. Use short sentences and paragraphs.

### **Other tips**

- When you've gotten published, promote, promote, promote. Send the link to the SGAC Google group and national staff will feature your work on our social media pages and website! Also, make sure to show off your hard work on your chapter's social media accounts and website as well as your personal accounts.
- If your piece is published, print out a hard copy or buy a copy of the paper and send it to your target elected official(s) with a personal note. Their staff is likely monitoring the editorial pages, but sending it directly will ensure they see it and understand it's relevant to them. Include a request to meet with the representative for a further discussion about the issue.