

Alameda County Alliance for Arts Learning Leadership



Guidelines on Writing Op-Eds to News Editors

Op-Eds and letters to the Editor are short articles in a newspaper's Editorial Section. Letters are usually about 250 words or less; Op-Eds about 800 words. Letters generally respond to a previous article in the paper.).

Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor can be very useful tools for advocates to get your message out.

- Most policymakers read these consistently; it is an important way for elected officials to track issues important to their constituents.
- It is an affordable way to address public opinion.
- They are your words, your message. No misquoting, no chance that the reporter will miss your point (or come to his own). And your opponents have to write their own article to get a response in.
- You can make connections in policy that are more difficult in hallway conversations.
- If your issue is not getting press, or is now "old news", an article can revive the issue.

How to write an Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor:

- Plan your message. Choose just one. Don't try to pack too much in. If you have a different take or a unique perspective on an issue, it is more likely to be published.
- Choose your target. If you are trying to move public opinion, look for the paper with the largest circulation. If you want to reach a particular legislator, choose his hometown paper or one you know that he reads.
- Start writing.
 - **Keep it as short as possible.** When they say 750 words, they mean it. The most common reason that articles are not published is because they are too long.
 - **Be clear.** Big words and lots of statistics do not score more points, they just lose the reader.
 - **Be direct.** Don't use sarcasm or hypothetical questions. Don't make them guess what your point is.
 - **Real life stories engage readers** and can often make a point in far fewer words than a page of statistics.
 - **Choose words carefully.** Do not offend. No personal attacks. Do nothing that detracts the reader from your point.
 - **Use humor, as long as it is appropriate.**
 - **Explain your stake in the issue up front.**
 - It can be effective if you bring up your opponents' case and prove it wrong. If you can't, don't include it.
 - **Offer readers action steps, if possible.**
 - Include your name, address, a phone number where you can be reached, any organizational affiliation, and a one-sentence description of that organization. You definitely do not have to be writing on behalf of an organization to get published.
- Triple check your facts.
- Ask a friend to read it over to check for errors and to be sure it is understandable and engaging.
- If you do get published, save the clipping. Send it to policymakers in case they didn't see it.