

Op-ed Writing

The first thing you have to do is get someone at the paper to read your column. So present it neatly, professionally, double spaced and within the word limit. When they receive syndicated columns from the news services they subscribe to, these are almost always 2.5 to 4 pages in length, and that's in pretty big type. Don't send anything more than four pages.

Why op-eds are rejected:

- too long.
- too much has already been said on the topic.
- not perceived as timely.
- not well or compellingly written.
- writer not seen as an authoritative source.

Focus

"Every successful piece of nonfiction should leave the reader with one provocative thought that he didn't have before. Not two thoughts, or five—just one. So try to decide what point you most want to leave in the reader's mind."

William Zinsser
On Writing Well, p. 63

This principle of keeping to one main point you want to leave the reader with can help you keep your column short and focused. And by being focused, you can have the room to build a convincing case. Ask yourself: what do I want people to think or believe after they've read this? What change am I seeking in attitude among readers?

The op-ed dissected

- **The lead.** You can't just begin, you need to write a lead in a way that interests readers and invites them to easily read on. There are different types of leads: (summary, descriptive, narrative and teaser.) You can also start with a quote. The lead can be humorous, ironic or even shocking. But it must grab and interest the reader.

- **Background information:** Provide historical data and anecdotal data as background to your position. Quotes can help break up the story, but aren't necessary and shouldn't be over used.

- **Supporting facts:** Provide specific details, numbers, as needed to build your case. Attribute your facts. Provide supporting positions by other organizations, or at least imply them by citing them as sources.

- **Smooth transitions:** These are things you may add later in the editing process after you get all the information down. But you need to have them: the article should flow smoothly from one paragraph to the next. If an abrupt change seems somewhat necessary or inevitable, use subheads in the column.

- **Write an ending.** Don't just let it fizzle out. Zinsser likes endings that are surprising, that add an unexpected twist. I like endings that wind back to the beginning to reestablish the point and wrap the whole thing up together in a neat package. A particularly poignant quote is also useful as an ending. Think back again to the one point you want to

leave in reader's mind. This is the last chance to repeat it or state it in a particularly interesting way.

- Include a biographical paragraph that establishes why you are a credible source on the topic.

- Again, always stay within the word limit established.