

Opinion Writing: The 800-word essay

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One of the most common forms of opinion writing is the op-ed piece, a standard feature of print journalism for almost a century. Contrary to what you might assume, the 'op' in op-ed is not short for opinion. Rather, op-ed refers to the traditional format of newspapers where the editorial pages consisted of two facing pages. On the left ran the opinions of the paper's editorial staff. Opposite the editors (or op-ed) on the right hand page were typically opinion pieces from the public, either solicited by the editors or submitted by authors.

One of the reasons opinion writing was physically separate from the news was to underscore the difference between the two forms. Unlike the news, which was traditionally meant to be objective reporting and a presentation of facts, opinion writing was meant to express a particular point of view and persuade through argumentation. So as not to confuse the two, even today many news organizations prohibit the news staff from penning editorial pieces.

The 800-word essay has a standard form and its length (in reality about 750 to 900 words) evolved to fit the space available in a column of a broadsheet newspaper. (Broadsheet refers to longer rectangular papers like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Financial Times*, *The Straits Times*, etc. while the tabloid format originally referred to papers that are more square in shape though over time, the styles came to reflect a certain type of content.)

With the advent of electronic media, there are no physical limitations on the length of pieces and opinion can be expressed and disseminated in 280 characters, as a wordless image or in variable length blog posts. Still, however, there is value in mastering the art of the 800-word essay. Pieces that are much shorter may be more appropriate as letters to the editor, much longer and an editor will ask for cuts or simply reject it. Newspapers, especially those considered 'of record', continue to be read by those whose views you may care about and the op-ed can be a particularly effective way to reach your target audience.

How to Write It In this section, we use the following examples to illustrate our points.

- K Ranga Krishnan. [Exposure to sunlight may prevent myopia](#). *Today Online*. August 8, 2014.
- Trisha Craig. [Gain an edge with international work experience](#). *Today Online*. November 19, 2014.
- Leen Decadt. [How businesses can take a stand against child labour](#). *World Vision International*. June 7, 2015.

- Héctor Tobar. [We need protests. And paintings.](#) *New York Times*, January 27, 2018.

In the 800-word opinion piece, there is little space for extraneous material. It is tight and so must be your argument. In addition, you are competing with other stories of the day so it should be clear from the outset what your point is. If your reader has to get to the middle or the end before she knows what you are arguing, it is likely that by that point, you've lost her.

A common structure for this type of piece is:

- A creative lead paragraph ☐
- A nut paragraph (the central point)☐
- Body paragraphs with argument and evidence ☐
- Body paragraphs with your proposed solutions or unique ideas
- A wrap up ☐

Unlike other forms of non-fiction writing, news paragraphs, including those in opinion writing, tend to be short – just a sentence or two. The lead should grab the reader's attention and the focus should be apparent from the outset. K Ranga Krishnan begins an opinion piece on increasing myopia in children with “We learn about the world mostly through what we see. Our eyes are our connection to the world.” This is a catchy, almost poetic way to introduce the importance of the eyes. ☐

This creative lead can then be followed by what is known as a ‘nut paragraph’, or one that introduces your main point. You should always be able to sum up what you are writing in a sentence. If you are not clear from the outset what the piece is about, it will be much harder to write. Typically, the nut paragraph introduces that idea and while it often appears close to the beginning of the essay, it need not.

The following are the nut paragraphs in the accompanying readings:

In sunny places such as Singapore, where the difference between outdoor and indoor light intensity is most extreme, perhaps myopia is more easily developed when children stay indoors. Krishnan piece

To remain a globally competitive economy, producing the kinds of skills that employees and industries will need may require us to rethink the way people are trained. Craig piece

There is a critical piece of the puzzle that's often ignored. We need to involve businesses. Decadt piece

To defend the place of millions of immigrants and their progeny in American society, we need not only protest of political changes but also more art. Tobar piece

Body paragraphs should present facts and data that you have collected as you sought supporting evidence for your claim. Here, you can quote sources (including previous news stories that your piece may be reacting to), give examples and statistics, refer to your own data, or use analogies. In the myopia piece, for example, the author highlighted a study

of children of Chinese heritage in Australia to compare them with Chinese children in Singapore in order to show that myopia rates are not entirely a function of genetics. In Craig's piece, she not only cited data from the European Commission's study but also offered some information about sample size to help readers understand that the results are likely robust, given how many people were surveyed.

After presenting the evidence, you need to spend a little time offering solutions to the problem or situation you have described. It is important not to preach or moralize but simply to show why your suggestions will have the desired effect. If yours is only a partial solution, it is fine to say that.

To continue with the example of the myopia piece, the author proposes more outdoor time for children as one way to ameliorate the problem since exposure to sunlight is one of the factors that help eye development. Yet, he also points out that new drugs are being pioneered for myopia. He recognizes that this is another, different solution than the one that he is proposing but also notes that drugs are not without side-effects and concludes that both remedies may be important. That is, he implicitly shows those who might say there is no need to send children outside when soon we will have drugs to fix the problem that they are mistaken. This is an effective way of presenting your case: tacitly acknowledge that there are other views and/ or potential solutions that you have taken them into account, but then show why you believe your position to be right or at least crucial to include.

In the case of the child labor piece, the author argues that only by understanding the up and downstream causes and effects of child labor will we be able to curb it. Her point is a rebuff to those who think that merely taking children out of work places will solve the problem. In this way, her argument implicitly takes on a different point of view, which in the author's view is incomplete and misguided.

Sometimes the solution you want to propose will be expensive or time-consuming or have some other significant downside. Acknowledge that but ask your reader to consider the costs of not adopting your solution. See the readings for some examples: even if there are positive goods to industry from students gaining international experience, business is unlikely to pay for it, Craig argues, so the solution is for institutions of higher education to take on the responsibility. Tobar is arguing that the denial of their humanity is an act of violence and injustice towards the Latinx community and that art is a way of confronting that. Implicitly, then, the social cost of embracing art and culture as a means to remedy the problem is not only worthy but also imperative.

Make sure your solutions are not just feasible but think creatively about how to devise ones that would garner a lot of support. One of the failures, in our view, of Decadt's piece is that it asks companies to take on responsibility for children in a way that would not elicit much support in corporate circles. There is a stronger argument that could have

been made or emphasized about why it would be good for companies to do that as opposed to the prescriptive tone used.

You may want to include a final sentence or paragraph that wraps up the piece by returning to where you began. This is optional but the symmetry of such a structure makes this a common way to end. Craig's piece, for example, ended with the play on words "that is something we can all aspire to" as a way to refer back to the ASPIRE report mentioned at the outset.

What to Write About Ideas can be found in many settings. You must be or become an informed observer of those issues you are writing about, and you may find that casual conversations with colleagues or stakeholders, a speech by a politician or influential thought leader in your field, or a story in the news can lead to ideas.

In addition, academic work is also a potential source of ideas. Many opinion pieces serve the role as a kind of cultural translator of scholarly work for the general public, both explaining it in language that is intelligible to the non-academic and showing the practical implications of the work. This helps establish your qualifications as an expert or can be a function of your own expertise.

This is not just a matter of reproducing what the research says; for an opinion piece, you still need an argument about why it is relevant for your audience or the general public, and it is helpful if there is some sort of news hook. That could be that the study in question has just been released, or the work could relate to a pertinent local issue.

Consider some of the examples in the readings. Krishnan's op-ed discusses the staggeringly high rates of myopia in Singapore and some other Asian nations. While the medical research he quotes is not breaking news, it does relate to a growing public health concern and is therefore timely, as are his suggestions about how to alleviate the problem.

Craig's piece argues that spending time abroad in work or study attachments can give young workers important skills. By not only relating this argument to the government's much discussed [ASPIRE report](#) but also using the news hook of a large, important study that had just been released by the European Union, it had a timeliness that appealed to the editor.

Your own work and research can form the basis of an opinion piece. You may have data that helps address an issue of interest to the general public. In [this example](#), political scientist Erica Chenoweth argues for the effectiveness of peaceful resistance to non-democratic governments, in part by making reference to a study she and a colleague conducted.

Do beware, however, of the tendency that many academics have of going into too much detail about the specifics of a study when they first try writing opinion pieces. Remember

that you only have 800 words and typically, you would discuss the academic study or research as the jumping off point or supporting evidence for your argument, not the main point of your opinion piece. In the Chenoweth example, she briefly mentions that her research examined a century's worth of civil conflicts to conclude that nonviolent resistance is somewhat more successful than armed rebellion but then quickly moves to the more general discussion of the particular issue her piece is about: prospects for democracy in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. For more on the differences of how opinion differs from academic writing, see the *Comparing Types of Writing* handout.

As a scholar, you can also use op-ed writing as a way to establish your credibility as an expert outside the academy by bringing your unique perspective to public and policy conversations, build your brand, and create a broader audience for your work. For book authors, the op-ed offers opportunities at different stages of the publication process. While you are still working on the book, you may find your overall framework allows you to offer a comment on a topic of interest to the public. For example, in 2016, Harvard professors Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky published [this piece](#) "Is Donald Trump a Threat to Democracy?" while working on *How Democracies Die*, their 2018 book about the breakdown of democracy in Europe and Latin America. While still relatively far from publication, op-ed pieces like this one helped establish their voice on topical political issues and contributed to interest in their book when it came out.

Closer to your publication date, you may find that you can adapt portions of your book for a general audience. In that case, op-eds are not just a way of introducing your ideas to the public but can be also be a marketing tool. Consider this [op-ed](#) with the memorable title, "Popular People Live Longer" by UNC professor Mitch Prinstein that links ideas of social connection and health. Certainly, in our social media obsessed age, it would be a topic that any opinion page editor would find appealing. But the author tagline shows that it is also a shrewd form of marketing for his book: *Mitch Prinstein (@mitchprinstein), a professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is the author of the forthcoming "Popular: The Power of Likability in a Status-Obsessed World," from which this essay was adapted.*

Your book's publication is also an opportune time to pen an op-ed. In the US, questions about spending on social services for the poor are a contentious political issue. A piece about poverty, the housing market and rent subsidies might be timely regardless of who wrote it, but this [compelling essay](#) by Matthew Desmond also highlights a sense of timeliness relevant to the author: its publication coincided with the release of his acclaimed book, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*.

Becoming an Informed Observer Ideas for editorials and columns can be found in the news and features sections of any good publication, print or online. To follow the public discussion on issues or new policies, become a regular reader of the newspaper

where you live or that your target audience reads. While it is difficult to go through all potential publications on a daily basis, thanks to technology, you do not have to. It is possible to customize the information you receive so that it covers many sources and is not overwhelming. You can set a Google Alert (or other notification service) for the kind of topics you want to stay current on. For example, you could get links to all stories that concern: “Environmental Health Risks Asia”; “multigenerational housing market”; “palm oil deforestation”, or any other topic of interest by setting up an alert that will deliver articles to your inbox. That way, you are unlikely to miss them and will often find important stories in publications you do not typically read. To learn more about Google alerts, see [here](#).

For pieces related to current news such as the release of a new report, a speech, an incident, timeliness matters. When a topic is in the news or is a headline, it is far more likely that an editor will publish a piece if you get it to him quickly while it is still fresh in the minds of the readers. This means that you must keep up to date on issues and when something becomes newsworthy, and you need to be able to pull a piece together quickly.

Examples: In the Spring of 2016, the Chinese government began to crack down on NGOs in what is taken by the West to be an attempt to stifle civil society. See [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). This is an ongoing issue but there is a timeliness to it while it is in the news cycle. Were you to want to write about that, May 2016 would have been a good time to do it as an editor would be much more receptive to such a piece when the controversy is still news than he or she would be later.

There are also knowable news hooks that you can plan for in advance. For example, the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue, which is an Asia security summit, always takes place the last weekend of May/first weekend of June in Singapore. If you have a piece on security issues in the South China Sea, the Summit could be the news hook that appeals to an editor. Similarly, the UN Climate Change conferences typically take place in November or early December and the dates and location are announced well in advance. Your piece on sustainable development for publication in Dec 2018 could start “When delegates for the COP24 conference gather today in Katowice, Poland, they will need to...” This just requires making a minor adjustment to a piece in order to contextualize it with something in the news. You can also have a piece that is largely planned and partially written but that reacts to something coming out of such events. In that case, you are presenting your topic and making your argument in a way that is explaining and commenting on something in the news you can plan in advance for.

Final remarks Opinion writing is not adversarial or protest although it can put across a view that is strongly in opposition to some state of affairs. Unlike reporting, it is not meant to be an objective delivery of facts. Rather, it is meant to persuade. It has a point of view and to be persuasive, it builds an argument. A good opinion piece offers evidence to support the argument and often anticipates counter-arguments in order to dispense with them.

Part of the credibility of the piece is the authority of the author. Sometimes, the author's professional role helps to establish his or her trustworthiness. For example, the director of an NGO writing on a topic on which the NGO focuses would be seen as having some privileged standing but it can be a double-edged sword. The same director, of course, could be seen as unreliably biased. So in identifying yourself as the author, give some thought to how the tagline is phrased and how you represent your affiliations.

For students and scholars, the ability to act as interpreters of academic work or to bring your own work to the public is a strategic advantage in crafting op-eds. We encourage you to develop this form of writing as part of your professional skillset. You will bring important ideas into the public sphere, broaden your reach and influence, and, we believe, have fun in the process.

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