

Writing an Op-Ed

Attracting press coverage is crucial for scientists who want to use their expertise to affect public policy and get traction on an issue. However, scientific research and media coverage aren't always a perfect fit. The speed of today's media, and the small amount of space journalists are given to cover complex scientific issues, can make interactions between scientists and the press challenging. Yet scientific expertise has never been in higher demand in the mainstream media.

Writing op-eds for publication in newspapers is an effective way to get your message to both the public and policymakers.

The Basics

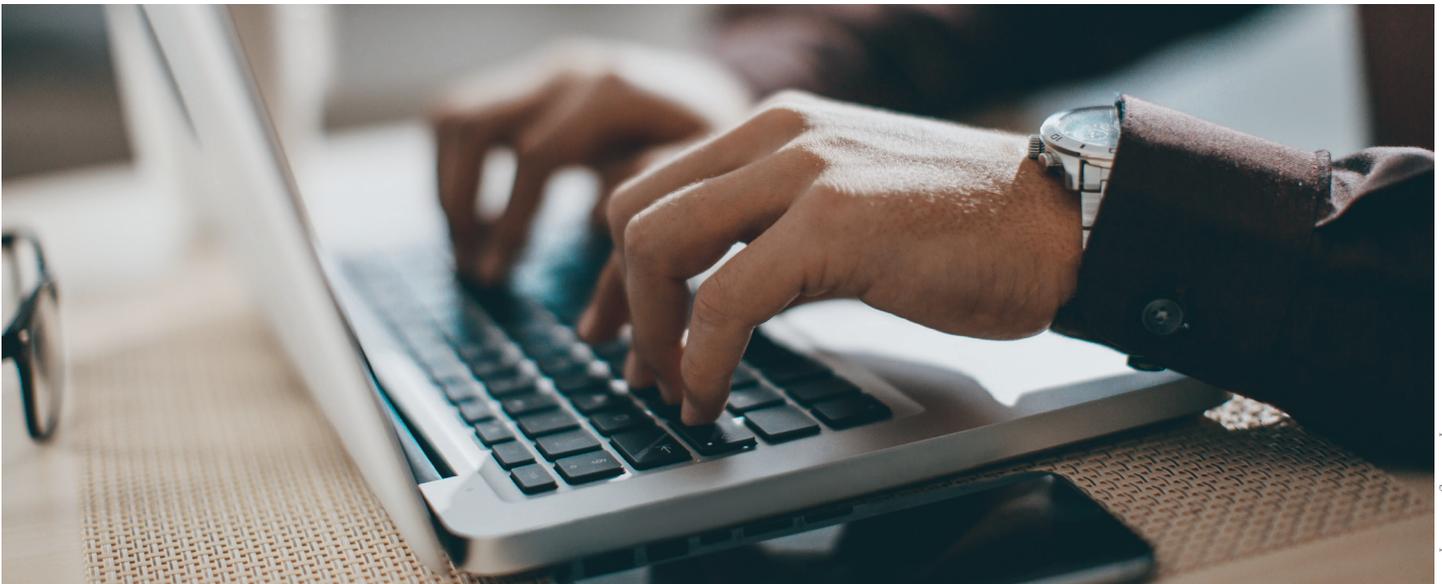
Op-eds offer you a chance to get your viewpoint out in a visible way. The term comes from the fact that these pieces typically appear opposite the editorial page in most newspapers and are often printed next to columns by syndicated writers like Ellen Goodman or George Will. Op-eds are unsolicited articles written by people not affiliated with the paper—ranging from business executives and schoolkids to community leaders and scientists or other subject matter experts.

It is often difficult to get an op-ed published; there is limited space available and editors receive a large number of submissions. You might have better luck with a letter to the editor, which takes less time and effort, but if you're committed to the op-ed format, keep in mind that, just like a good essay, op-eds have an introduction, body, and conclusion.

- The **introduction** should grab readers' attention and encourage them to read on. Use timely references, colorful language, and metaphors. Try to limit the introductory paragraph to three sentences.
- The **body** of the piece further develops your thesis, giving some background and context. Keep each paragraph short and focused—three to five sentences per paragraph. Try to make only one point in each paragraph, and be sure each paragraph flows smoothly into the next. Every paragraph should tie back to the introduction and your overall thesis—be careful to avoid going off on tangents.
- The **conclusion** (your final paragraph) ties up any loose ends and closes with a kick. It should link to your introduction, carrying the same theme but adding something new. Use your conclusion to restate your main point or opinion. And, just as your first sentence should grab readers and make them want to continue reading, the last sentence should be memorable enough to make your point stick in the reader's mind.

Improving Your Odds of Getting Published

- **Do some research first.** Before you sit down to write your op-ed, check with your local newspaper to find out the protocol for submissions. Many papers have strict word limits; be sure to follow them carefully. Some, but not all, papers



Op-eds offer you a chance to get your viewpoint out in a visible way.

accept op-eds by fax or email. You should ask to whose attention op-eds should be addressed, and if they require any supplemental information beyond the personal information listed below. Submitting an op-ed to the wrong person, one that is not the correct length, or failing to include all the required information can be enough to keep even the best-written op-ed out of print.

- **Use a catchy title that ties into the theme of your piece.** The title is what people see first, so it should entice them to read.
- **Keep the piece short and to the point.** Ideally, an op-ed should be 550 to 725 words. Remember, newspapers have limited space so a short piece has a better chance of being published.
- **Grab readers' interest in the first couple of lines** and close with a sentence that will help them remember your point. Some creative writing will increase the likelihood of your op-ed being published and being remembered.
- **Include your personal information at the end:** name, university or organization, title, phone number, address.

Some creative writing will increase the likelihood of your op-ed being published and being remembered.

Many papers will not run a piece without first confirming that you are the actual author.

- **Follow up.** A few days after you submit your op-ed, call the op-ed editor to gauge their level of interest.

Learn More

The Union of Concerned Scientists has additional information on ways scientists can engage with the media—see www.ucsusa.org/take-action/science-network/talking-media.