

# Answering back with a letter to the editor

## Op-eds let you tell your story your way

If you can express an opinion clearly, persuasively and concisely, you can reach thousands of people, sway hearts, change minds and perhaps even reshape public policy. An op-ed, sometime known as a guest column or guest editorial, is a newspaper piece that expresses the opinions of a writer who is unaffiliated with the newspaper.

Placing an op-ed about an issue around HIV prevention can help move your advocacy agenda forward or provide important information to key audiences, including policy makers.

The traditional placement for op-eds is opposite the editorial page in newspapers, but there are also often opportunities for opinion journalism on television, radio and online.

The key to having an op-ed accepted for publication is to give the news outlet a polished, interesting, timely and newsworthy piece.

Track the news and move quickly when you see an opportunity to respond to something. The release of new study results – positive or negative – can be a great opportunity to place an op-ed. You might also write an op-ed to help correct misinformation circulating about an issues related to HIV.

But remember, you must move quickly to place an op-ed before interest moves from your issue to something else.

So you've found an issue that you think is newsworthy and publishing something about it would help move your advocacy agenda forward. How do you write something that an editor will want to print?

## Keys to writing a good opinion piece

- You only have about 10 seconds to capture a reader's interest, so state your conclusion first.
- Make your strongest point up front, and then spend the rest of the op-ed making your case, and adding key facts.
- Stick to a single argument and do it well. Focus tightly on one issue or idea.
- Use clear, powerful, direct language.
- Avoid clichés and jargon.
- Be brief. Use no more than 750 words. Most newspapers won't accept longer pieces.
- Ground your opinion in factual, researched or first-hand information. Make sure you research all of the information you use. Don't let your passion get in the way of the truth.
- Be timely, controversial, but not outrageous. Be the voice of reason.
- Be personal and conversational. Bring in the human element that will help your reader understand and accept your opinion. Tell readers why they should care.
- Near the end, clearly re-state your position and issue a call to action. Make specific recommendations for what needs to happen.

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- Use the active voice.
- You may write an op-ed as a group or coalition, but most news outlets won't publish pieces with more than 2-3 authors, so decide who among your group is the most newsworthy or provides the most authority on the issue. You can also ask someone with a higher profile to co-sign a n op-ed you've written.
- Be prepared to edit or adapt your piece, if it is accepted.

## **How to submit an op ed**

Many newspapers and online news sites post guidelines and instructions for submitting op-eds. Most provide an email address for submissions. Be sure to include your contact information.

Don't submit the same op-ed to multiple outlets at the same time. Newspapers want exclusive content. Some online sources are happy to have articles cross-posted, but check first before you submit an accepted piece to another outlet.