

HOW-TO: WRITING OP-EDS

Op-eds are powerful because they help you reach an audience beyond academia.

What is an Op-ed?

An op-ed, short for “opposite the editorial page,” is a legacy term from the days of print publications. Newsroom editors write the editorial pages. Outside experts write op-eds. Op-eds are brief pieces, typically 800-900 words, that present an informed and focused opinion to the publication’s audience. Both types of writing are meant to provoke discussion. Op-eds provide experts like you with a platform to share your knowledge, influence public conversations, and engage with your community.

Can I write an Op-Ed?

Yes! And you should.

Why Write an Op-ed?

Addiction is an important topic in our communities. However, many beliefs about addiction are outdated and harmful. Editors often want more writing in this space but may have limited newsroom resources to put towards the topic. As experts, you can lend your many years of knowledge on these topics to help inform your community.



OP-ED CHECKLIST

for pitching to a news outlet

☐ Prep your op-ed

Research the outlet's audience and look out for news hooks relevant to your pitch. Review the outlet's submission guidelines.

☐ Pitch your op-ed

Be succinct and emphasize your expertise, importance of the story to their audience and news hook.

☐ Write your op-ed

- Headline
- Hook and thesis
- Arguments and counter-arguments
- Summary

☐ Follow-up

If you receive a response, make sure to say thank you (even if it's a rejection), and if you don't receive a response within 7 to 10 working days, it is appropriate to follow up or pitch to other outlets.



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Even some seemingly “simple” concepts to us – like medications and behavioral interventions for addiction, harm reduction, and recovery – are so misunderstood that a straightforward op-ed on this topic can help shift understanding.

This writing can help shape public discourse and thereby influence policymakers, practitioners, and the general public’s understanding of addiction. Op-eds can give you a space to directly advocate for evidence-based solutions and to counter popular but incorrect narratives about addiction.

Op-eds may not always be related to a specific academic publication you have written, but they can complement your academic output by engaging the broader public in these findings. This style of writing can help you reapproach how your work matters to your community. It also gives you a more creative outlet for your thoughts in this space.

Op-eds can also increase your academic profile by contributing to higher citations for your academic papers. Lastly, op-eds create other opportunities, such as testifying at government meetings, non-academic speaking engagements, and can spur other media opportunities.

Where Do I Write an Op-Ed?

While the pull toward prestigious national publications is understandable, local news is still critical to local policy and the lives of people in your community. Always have multiple plans for an op-ed, especially if responding to an emerging story. Consider where the odds are best to have your work accepted and your motivations for writing the piece. What audience do you want to influence? Where will your piece be the greatest contribution to the discourse? Writing for local outlets can help you write for national ones (if that is your goal).

List of newspapers that accept op-eds:
theopedproject.org/submissions

TIPS FOR YOUR OP-ED:

Be Quick

If it is breaking news, you do not want to miss your window. Other stories may be more evergreen and can be pre-written and pitched when the time is right.

Be Succinct

Jargon is your enemy. Remember: Most news outlets are writing for an audience with a 5th-grade reading level.

Be Aware

Remember the purpose of your op-ed is to persuade, inform, and enter the public discourse.

Be Flexible

There can be more than one news hook for your writing, be flexible in shifting your 'why.'

Be Prepared

for feedback. Some editors will give you edits; others will take it or leave it.

Be Respectful

The average reader is not an expert on this topic; however, many readers have personal experience with it. Respect their experience and how it guides understanding of the topic.

PREPPING YOUR OP-ED:

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As you're preparing your op-ed, whether you're preparing a pitch or pre-writing your opinion piece before pitching it, there are some important factors to keep in mind. Following these tips can help you have more success in your pitching and writing.

✓ **Know the audience.**

- Read/watch/listen to their news first!
- To inform the news, you must know the news.
- Always be on the lookout for news hooks.
- Consider both national and local newspapers, magazines, and online platforms.
- Make sure it is a topic they cover. Understanding the news they are creating can help you understand what their audience will care about and lead to a more successful pitch.
- Pay attention to topic areas, word limits, formatting, tone, and contact info for submissions.
- Show genuine interest in their work and publication.
- Personalize your pitch by mentioning the journalist or publication's work.

✓ **Timing is everything.**

- Avoid pitching during massive news events, like a natural disaster or impending election day — they might not be able to pay attention to your pitch.
- Monitor news coverage for a story your op-ed can “hook” into your reference.
- News events can include new federal data, a new bill, celebrities, policy discussions, or holidays/advocacy events (e.g., National Recovery Month).
- Take national stories and help localize them.

PITCHING YOUR OP-ED:

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Pitches happen over email, typically to a newsroom editor. Sometimes, these are editors who specifically oversee the editorial page and specialize in opinion pieces – they may even write opinion pieces or columns themselves.

In smaller, local newsrooms, pitches may be responded to by the managing editor of the news outlet, a person who oversees all of the editorial content the publication is producing.

✓ In the pitch

- Include a clear and catchy subject line.
- Include relevant credentials and job title.
 - Explain how your expertise can provide solutions. This helps provide context for why you are an expert and the best person to speak to their audience.
 - You do not have to have a terminal degree or prestigious job title to be an expert. Your life experience and training to date leave you well-equipped to help others understand this topic.
 - Explicitly include the topics you are comfortable talking about e.g., specific substances or domains within addiction science.
 - Explain why their audience will care about this topic or how it impacts the audience they serve. Why is this relevant? Why should we care?
- What is the news hook?
 - Responding to a local or national issue with a local perspective
 - Responding to another op-ed
 - Responding to other news coverage
- Summarize your pitch.
 - In a quick couple-sentence summary of your pitch, highlight its relevance, uniqueness, and potential impact.
 - Include any relevant research, data, or expert sources that support your pitch.
- Your contact information, brief bio and link to your website.
- Invite the editor to learn more, schedule an interview, or explore the story further.

SAMPLE PITCH

Subject line: Op-Ed Pitch: Fentanyl in Halloween Candy

Hi [EDITOR] -

My name is [NAME], and I am [POSITION]. I have been researching/treating/working with in addiction spaces for [time], and I live in Harrison County, one of the counties covered by your paper [CONNECTION TO PUBLICATION].

I have been following your work for some time and see that you often cover addiction issues in our community. I have seen several national stories warning parents about potential fentanyl contamination in their kids Halloween candy [NATIONAL HOOK], and in my area of expertise, I know this is a false claim. [SENTENCE EXPLAINING HOW YOU KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW].

Attached is an op-ed I have drafted to address this topic and educate our community. With the holiday just around the corner, I know parents in our communities are concerned about the safety of their children, but I want to explain to them why this alarm is misplaced [WHY DOES THE AUDIENCE CARE?]. I would love to set up a time to chat about this issue and the research in our field to see how I can support your coverage of this topic.

Thank you!

STRUCTURE OF AN OP-ED

When drafting an op-ed, you can follow a model similar to what you may write in a professional setting: present a thesis, follow it with an argument – that relies on data – and conclude by pointing back to your thesis. But the following tips will help you enhance your writing and make it more like what opinion editors are looking for, resulting in more success being published.

>> Compelling and Straightforward Headline

Headlines are not complete sentences, but they always include a subject and a verb – especially a verb that shows action

>> Introductory Paragraph

Set the scene with your lede (the first sentence of your writing).

- “Hook” the reader’s attention from the first sentence with the timely nature of your piece, why is it news, and why is this information crucial.
 - Use the news that sparked your idea
 - Cite a new study or data
 - Use an anecdote or important historical reference
 - Reference pop culture
- Clearly state your thesis and an overview of your argument.
 - Base your argument around facts, stats, credible news reports, academic writing, quotes from prominent individuals, or first-hand experience
 - Get straight to the point. Op-eds are brief.



>> Argument, Supporting facts, potential counterpoints (Two-Three Paragraphs)

- Logically and persuasively lay out your argument.
- Back up your argument with evidence, facts, and examples to bolster credibility.
- Each paragraph should focus on a specific point or aspect related to your thesis.
- A balanced op-ed is important for credibility. Acknowledge valid points that oppose your argument with empathy and respect.
- Use sub-headings to help organize your argument and make it easy to follow.
- Straightforward commentary is not always possible or desirable. To touch on a nuanced issue, briefly explore the bigger picture to provide more context.
- “To be sure...” paragraph can acknowledge the complexities of this space. This is where you can address limitations or exceptions to your argument.

>> Conclusion (One Paragraph)

- Summarize your main points and restate your thesis.
- Can include a relevant “call to action.”
- Encourage readers to think, act, or engage further with the issue..

Alternative: Diamond Model

1. Start with a small anecdote about your community/person impacted by the issue.
2. Build the argument and expand with facts that also expand the scope.
3. Bring it back to the original anecdote.



FOLLOWING UP

Rejection happens and provides an opportunity to improve your writing and find a different outlet. If rejected, respond graciously and learn from the feedback. But if you have not received any response, it is okay to follow up.

Some op-eds you write will be anticipating an upcoming event and are less pressing for a newsroom. Others are responding to breaking news and might have a short shelf life. Be understanding when reaching out. Let them know you are interested in the status of the op-ed you sent and hope they are interested in running it. If they have not reached out to express their interest within 48 hours, assume they passed and send it elsewhere.

Why Experts Should Write Op-eds

Journalism plays a vital role in framing and informing discourse; however, most journalists are not trained in the latest addiction science or how that science is implemented through programs on the ground in our communities. These blind spots result in coverage that inadvertently conflicts with or leaves out clinical, research and public health priorities and is related to the treatment gaps in our communities.

Writing opinion pieces, or op-eds, helps you explain this critical scientific and medical research to your communities in a place that they seek out *and still trust* for information that impacts their lives and at a level that they can understand.

About Reporting on Addiction

We are a 501c3-supported organization dedicated to increasing the accuracy and empathy of reporting on addiction. To accomplish this, Reporting on Addiction provides innovative training, technical assistance, and resources for journalists, journalism educators, experts through training, and experts through experience.

We work to:

- *Improve the themes/story narratives chosen by journalists.*
- *Improve the language used by journalists.*
- *Improve the images/videos created by journalists.*

