



So, you want to write an op-ed?

Great! By publishing an op-ed, you have the opportunity to influence policy, raise the level of public discourse, and improve public understanding of complex issues. Op-eds also help to position you with reporters and producers as a trusted source in your academic field.

A few things to know

1. Unlike a letter to the editor, op-eds aren't responses to a specific news story. They're opinion articles about a timely topic, typically about 750 words. They're called "op-eds" because they often appear on the page that's *opposite* a newspaper's *editorials* (though the NY Times [now calls them "guest essays"](#)).
2. You'll pitch a completed draft to editors, not an idea. Unless you have a relationship with an editor, it's very unlikely she or he will commission you to write an op-ed.
3. The article needs to be exclusive, meaning it must not have been published elsewhere.
4. Is it a better fit for [The Conversation](#)? If your proposed article is grounded in research but doesn't advocate a position/solution, consider pitching the idea to *The Conversation*. If they accept your pitch, then they'll commission you to write it — and it's guaranteed to be published.
5. Planning to write about big, breaking news? The competition is fierce (and very fast). Instead, consider looking ahead to issues that are likely to make news in the coming weeks and pitch your article at least a week in advance.
6. If your article is accepted for publication, it's common to have a back-and-forth with the editor to revise it.

Before you start writing

What's your main message?

In less than 50 words, summarize it in language that a 13-year-old student would understand.

Can you answer "yes" to all of the following questions?

- Is the issue of significant interest to the general public?
- Is the issue related to your scholarship and expertise?
- Is your message unique and compelling?

Is your message something that's timely or relevant to the average person *now*?

If not, can you re-frame it so that it *is* timely? Or is there a date in the future when it would be timely?

Decide which news organization is your primary target for publishing the article.

- Check to see if they've already published something similar.
- Check the guidelines for submitting articles and the maximum word length of the articles they publish.
- Consider the best framing for that news organization. For instance, if you're writing for the NY Times, it should have a national angle/relevance, whereas if you're writing for the LA Times, it can relate specifically to California or Los Angeles.

Writing your op-ed

Grab the attention of readers right away

Strong ledes (the beginning of your story) will compel people to read further. They also typically explain why the article is timely and convey a strong point of view. The following are ledes from op-eds that illustrate some common ways to frame a story:

Reference recent news

In the span of a week, two acts of public violence have stolen the lives of 18 people and provided a stark reminder of the mass gun violence that characterized the pre-Covid United States — and that looms with the end of the pandemic.

[We've Spent Over a Decade Researching Guns in America. This is What We Learned.](#) — NY Times

Make it personal

“Why should you, a white woman, go work in Africa?”

The question was from an African American news-room colleague, and it knocked me back. It was the late 1990s, and I had just announced that I was joining the Peace Corps, assigned to a remote public health post in Zambia, in southern Africa.

[Abolishing the Peace Corps Would be a Mistake](#)
— Chicago Tribune

Reference recent research

As covid-19 vaccines become more accessible, the next big question will soon take center stage: Should kids be vaccinated?

The answer is probably yes, assuming the virus will circulate for years to come and that vaccine trials for kids prove safe and effective. To understand why, here are some important data points to consider.

[The case for vaccinating children for covid-19](#)
— Washington Post

Compelling anecdote

I recently asked the undergrads in my class on virtue and vice to send me a brief note about a time when they either forgave someone in a meaningful way or found that they couldn't.

Their notes spoke of love, sorrow, finding a way — or not — to maintain relationships in the wake of wrongs. Nobody mentioned cancelling anybody.

[Forgiveness in an age of cancel culture](#) — LA Times

Anniversary or holiday connection

In 1945, Jacob Beser, a 24-year-old air force lieutenant from Baltimore, was the only crew member to be on both flights that dropped atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Though he never regretted what he had done, according to his grandson Ari Beser, he felt he had to bear witness to the worst act of inhumanity of man against his fellow man.

As we approach the 75th anniversary of Aug. 6 and Aug. 9, 1945, few are left to recall the shock as information leaked out about the atomic bombs that instantly destroyed two Japanese cities and propelled the whole world into the nuclear age.

[The 75th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki reminds us of the need to ban nuclear weapons](#) — Baltimore Sun

Pop culture references

The internet collectively cringed at Peloton's ad in which a husband gave his wife an exercise bike as a holiday gift. The ad sparked a wave of criticism and inspired a series of spoofs depicting the consequences of what many considered to be an outrageous gifting gaffe.

Fitness-themed gifts can be a minefield. Luckily, there's research that can help you.

[How to give a fitness gift without becoming the Peloton husband](#) — LA Times

Turn conventional wisdom on end

Anguish and even anger are entirely appropriate reactions to the fact that COVID-19 infection rates are still too high in many areas to permit the reopening of schools. Not only do many of our kids miss their friends and the chance to make new ones, but school attendance is a prerequisite for millions of parents to go to work. Also, schools provide healthy meals, which matters in a country with appalling levels of poverty and hunger.

The lockdown is bad enough. Must we also deal with the fear that children who aren't going to school are destined to fall behind academically?

[When school's out, education might suffer less than you think](#) — Boston Globe

Writing your op-ed

Make your case early, support it, challenge it

- Don't make readers wait until the end of your article to know your main message or position on an issue. State it upfront and then support it, like the following op-ed lede:

There is a clear next step in changing the Senate filibuster: Vice President Kamala Harris, as presiding officer of the Senate, can — and should — declare the current Senate filibuster rule unconstitutional. This would open the door for discussions on a new rule that would respect the minority without giving it an unconstitutional veto.

[The filibuster is unconstitutional. Here's how Vice President Harris can take it on](#) — LA Times

- Include hyperlinks to credible sources that back-up your assertions and statistics.
- What are the most compelling counter-arguments to the one you're making? Reference at least one and refute it. This is commonly known as the “to be sure” portion of an op-ed. It will give your article – and you – much more credibility.

Style tips

Use short sentences, short paragraphs

News articles, unlike journal articles, are composed of relatively short sentences and short paragraphs. Many paragraphs are one sentence long. Big blocks of dense copy deter readers.

Use an active, confident voice

“Write declarative sentences. Delete useless or weasel words such as ‘apparently,’ ‘understandable’ or ‘indeed.’ Project a tone of confidence, which is the middle course between diffidence and bombast.”

— David Brooks, *The New York Times*

Don't use jargon, acronyms and clichés

Avoid needless details

Resist the temptation to include details that don't advance your story and aren't essential to it, like specific dates of events, the names of people who will be unfamiliar to readers, etc.

Wrap it up with a strong ending

Endings will often tie the story together by echoing the lede and include a particularly memorable detail, final epiphany, or call-to-action.

Length: 750 words

The standard length for many news organizations is 750 words. Some publish longer articles on Sundays and others, like *The New York Times*, will consider articles that are 1,000 words or longer, but your best bet is to keep it short.

Don't worry about the headline

If it's accepted for publication, the editor will write the headline. But it certainly doesn't hurt to pitch your article with a compelling headline. Also, some scholars like to write their headline first, because that helps them determine how to frame the article.



Pitching your op-ed: FAQ

To whom should I send it?

This [page of our website](#) features hyperlinks to submission guidelines for a few popular news outlets and [this page](#) of the Op-Ed Project's website offers a more exhaustive listing.

Typically, the name and contact information of the op-ed editor isn't included with the guidelines for submitting articles, just a general email address like oped@newspaper.com. If you have the contact information for the op-ed editor or have worked with them before, it's fine to email them directly, but it's a good practice to also cc the generic email address. For many news organizations, several people are involved in screening op-eds. It's also possible the editor is out of town.

What do I include with the op-ed?

Include a very short note that conveys your main message, why your op-ed is (or will be) timely, and why you're a credible source to write about the topic.

Most news organizations want your phone number and a very short bio – typically just a couple of sentences that list your title and credentials. This is a good opportunity to reference a related book you wrote (e.g. "Author of _____")

Paste your op-ed below the pitch, don't send it as an attachment.

Can I send it to multiple news organizations at same time?

That's a bad idea, since nearly every publication insists on exclusivity. If multiple news organizations accept your article for publication, you're going to irritate the editors who reviewed it and made plans to run it. And they could remember that next time you submit an article.

If you're writing about something that's particularly time-sensitive, it's fine to specify in your pitch that you'll assume they're not interested if you don't hear back by a specific date (it's common to give 3 days for review). And if you don't hear back by that date, pitch your next favorite target.

How long should I wait?

Many news organizations request three days to review. Some will contact you only if they're interested in publishing it, while others will send rejection emails.

How should I identify myself?

Include your title and university affiliation. Please identify yourself with your full affiliation, "USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences," not just "USC."

If you're affiliated with a center/institute, the following are a couple ways you can reference both the center and Dornsife together:

- USC Dornsife Center for _____
- Center for _____ at USC Dornsife

What if I have a potential conflict of interest?

Just as you would with published research, you're advised to disclose potential conflicts of interest when submitting your op-ed for consideration.

What if I don't hear back or get rejected?

Don't feel dejected. There are many reasons your op-ed could have been rejected and the competition to place them, particularly with top-tier publications, is fierce.

You have a few options to consider:

- Pitch it to your next favorite publication — reframe it for that publication, if necessary
- Publish it yourself, on a site like [Medium](#)
- Share it (or portions of it) as a [Twitter thread](#)



After your op-ed is published

- Thank the editor for publishing it.
- Share it via your social media accounts, particularly Twitter.
- Notify the Dornsife communication team – we may share it on Dornsife's social media platforms. We'll also submit it to *USC in The News*, the daily recap of news stories related to the university and its scholars.