Mackinac Center for Public Policy

Debate Workshop Op-Ed Writing Guidelines

Op-eds are brief commentary essays that convey a point of view about a particular subject. They are typically found in newspapers opposite the editorial page, which is why they are called "op-eds." The main goal of an op-ed is to persuade the reader. A secondary goal is to inform the reader.

The following are suggestions for writing effective op-eds.

1. The essay should begin with a clear thesis paragraph and end with a concluding paragraph that summarizes the piece.

2. Individual paragraphs should be short (2-4 sentences is common) and begin with a clear topic sentence. Sentences should seldom be longer than 25-30 words.

3. Develop just one main idea, not several. (e.g., "children should be fed," not "children should be fed, clothed, housed, educated, entertained, and disciplined.") Your goal is to be persuasive regarding your main point, so the bulk of your essay should support that one point with ample evidence and logic. Your goal is not to be persuasive on several points. You will not have enough space in the essay to provide persuasive evidence and logic on several points.

4. Active voice is generally better than passive voice. For example, "The Legislature passed the bill" is better than "the bill was passed by the legislature."

5. Write with significant detail. Strong opinion is no substitute for facts and evidence that support your thesis. Include dates, amounts, names, and specific events.

6. Keep the audience in mind, which is the readership of a newspaper editorial page. Many people reading your essay will not share your opinions or values. Avoid name-calling, overly partisan language, and rhetorical firebombs. Make no accusations that aren't essential to your argument, and make no accusations without evidence. Minimize jargon.

7. Op-ed length is critical. Most newspapers will not consider publishing op-eds that exceed their maximum length, which is typically 700 words. The maximum word count for the Mackinac Center's scholarship competition is 725 words; our minimum is 600 words. (Your word processor should have a word-count feature.)

8. The most grievous op-ed error is plagiarism. Never use someone else's work without their consent or in a way that makes it appear to be your own work. Give proper credit for data, information and quotes. Finalist submissions are run through iThenticate ® Plagiarism Detection Software.