Writing an op-ed? Here are some tips

Although academics often shy away from advocacy, writing a short opinion piece for a website or newspaper is a time-honored practice of public service. Whether you take a position on a hot issue your research touches on, try to sprinkle in facts for a debate heavy on ideology, or think you have a tip for making the world incrementally better, let those fingers fly. But an op-ed is not a journal article, and if you’ve forgotten how to write without an abstract and bibliography, here are some concrete tips about writing for a general audience.

1. **Mechanics**

* Generally op-eds are **750 to 800 words** long.
* Unlike some academic writing, **keep sentences reasonably short and clear, and paragraphs much shorter** than you might be used to.
* Do not use footnotes, and **keep citations in your text to a minimum**. If you must acknowledge others’ work (and with the word limit, be sure it is a must), identify the person/organization only. In other words, do not use “as Smith (2006) found,” but “Innovative medical sociologist Susie Smith’s work with teens suggests ...”
* **Avoid passive voice** (but don’t obsess over this).
* Be learned, but also **be colloquial**
* **Avoid all acronyms** unless they already have a claim on the public consciousness (e.g. PTSD).

1. **Structure**

* **Start by explaining why you’re telling me this *now*.** This does not have to be a bald statement, and probably shouldn’t be. It can be an anecdote, a reflection on a current headline, or even a call to action, but it should be explicit and quick. Yes, there will be a headline that helps accomplish this, but ultimately the headline you submit – and *do* include one – might change.
* **Consider explaining why you are telling me this.** If you are writing about your specific research output, that’s easier. If you are writing about a current event and your expertise shines a light on some facet, briefly mention your background, ideally in a way that blends into the narrative and not as a declarative statement. For example, “As someone who has worked with and studied at-risk teens for 20 years …” Note: in general, your actual work will carry more weight with the public than your degrees.
* **Pick one facet of the issue and go deep**. Do not attempt to sketch out the entire history or scope of the issue and thus end up dealing in broad generalities. Instead, stay focused and specific. There’s probably lots of interesting tangents you could find yourself trying to cram in – save them for your next op-ed.
* Know what you are asking and **make sure your piece includes a call to action**. The usual point of an op-ed is to spur action, and the reader should both be convinced of your point of view and then know what to do about it. And no, “more research needs to be done” is almost never a call to action.
* Readers don’t care about literature searches and rarely care beyond the briefest touch on methodology.

1. **Strategy**

* **Identify who your audience** will be before starting to write. *Foreign Affairs* or *Wired* readers can be assumed to have some background in their publication’s focus, but you can’t assume that about a CNN.com or *New York* *Times* reader. Nonetheless, it’s dangerous to assume *everyone* already knows something that’s well-known in your field.
* **Satire and sarcasm rarely work**. Humor can be misconstrued – don’t abandon it, but be careful. And if you’re not particularly funny, this is a bad time to try and change that.
* **Provide some specific and real-world examples.** Readers live on the ground, not at 30,000 feet, so try not to use speculative examples. Remember the maxim: Show, don’t tell.
* Briefly acknowledge obvious **arguments against your position** and equally briefly rebut them. If you’re seeking funding, explain why your project should have a claim on taxpayer money. While it is a zero-sum game, try not to pit your pork against someone else’s pork.
* Also, **acknowledge weaknesses of your position** that you may not be able to rebut (e.g. it will be expensive or this will inconvenience some stakeholders) but explain **why it’s worth acting anyway**.
* Although you should have a passion for whatever you write about, or at least a deep-seated interest, **don’t let the passion carry you away**. Present an intellectual argument; reserve serves better than histrionics.

1. **Extra Tips**

* Having trouble? Start by **writing a headline or a tweet** that really summarizes what you want to say – this can really help cut to the chase and focus your piece if you have too many things to say.
* **Start writing** even if it’s imperfect at first. Weak, but begun, is better than perfect and undone.