The CQ Press Writing Guide for Public Policy

Second Edition

Andrew Pennock

University of Virginia

SAGE | CQPRESS

SAGE | CQPRESS

FOR INFORMATION:

CQ Press
An Imprint of SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-0718-5828-8

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Acquisitions Editor: Christy Sadler
Editorial Assistant: Kat Wallace
Production Editor: Vijayakumar
Copy Editor: Benny Willy Stephen
Typesetter: TNQ Technologies
Indexer: TNQ Technologies
Cover Designer: Candice Harman

23 24 25 26 27 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

11 OP-EDS

When you open a newspaper, or read one online, you will see two kinds of content: news articles and opinion pieces. The news of the day comprises the vast majority of content: reporting on what is currently happening with current political drama in Washington, D.C., economic trends in the heartland, or turmoil abroad.

While there is no place for opinions in the news section, there are two places in the paper where opinions are published (Shipley, 2004). In the editorial section, the editorial board of the paper shares its opinions on the major topics of the day. It endorses candidates and derides specific pieces of legislation. In contrast to the news, editorial boards often have a distinctive liberal or conservative slant. They publish their editorials on the editorial page, which you can usually find on the third-to-last page in the main section of a printed paper.

Opposite the editorial page, on the second-to-last page of the main section, you will find the opinions of individuals who are not on the editorial board of the paper. These articles are sometimes called *op-eds* because they are opinion pieces published opposite the editorial page in a printed paper. Op-eds are published with the aim of presenting challenging ideas to the public, ideas that challenge both the public's opinions and the opinions of the editorial board of the newspaper in which they appear.

With this in mind, major papers employ columnists who represent a diversity of viewpoints (Republicans and Democrats, religious and nonreligious, different racial backgrounds, etc) to produce about half of the op-eds they publish.

The other half of the op-eds newspapers publish come from writers outside the paper who submit op-ed pieces with their perspectives on important issues of the day. Sometimes the paper solicits writers, but most times the op-ed editorial board looks through many articles submitted by the public on topics of the day. For example, the *New York Times* says the objective of external submissions to the op-ed section is to:

> afford greater opportunity for exploration of issues and presentation of new insights and new ideas by writers and thinkers who have no institutional connection with The Times and whose views will very frequently be completely divergent from our own.
>
> *(Tumin, 2017)*

This opening provides public policy advocates (like you!) a chance to talk to the readers of the paper (possibly hundreds of thousands of them) about their issue directly. Moreover, op-eds don't just educate readers about the facts surrounding an issue; they

also ask readers to care about the moral aspects of an issue. They ask readers to decide that the solutions they recommend in the op-ed aren't just technically feasible but also are the right things to do.

The ability to make a moral case for your topic while simultaneously educating the public about the facts of your issue make op-eds a policy genre worth mastering. It's the rare chance you have to shape public debate and discussion on an issue. Let's learn more.

DISTINCTIVE ASPECTS OF OP-EDS

Successful op-eds don't simply have a topic (climate change); they have an issue (the adoption of a renewable energy standard) that advocates a clear action people should be for or against (May, 2012). You're not just providing facts about the issue to the reader; you're bringing a slant, a take, and a recommendation.

To do this effectively, you need to know and practice the distinctive aspects of op-eds. Like almost all forms of policy writing, op-eds come in many different forms. We'll look at the norms of the format below. But the truth is that while 90% of the op-eds you'll see look like this, a fair number of them don't. The best way to understand what the abnormal ones look like is to start reading op-eds, preferably in several different papers. Once you have a sense for what is normal, then you can start to see how authors violate the norms of the genre, both successfully and unsuccessfully. As you start reading them and then turn to writing your own, I encourage you to keep the guidelines below in mind and then branch out in your own writing once you have a sense of the wide variety of op-ed styles that exist.

Your Values Matter Here

The first distinctive aspect of op-eds is that you're not just allowed—but are encouraged—to bring your values into the writing. There aren't many types of public policy writing where it is appropriate to give your opinion. Most of the time, your job is to provide the facts and, if asked, lay out a reasoned case for any recommendations you might make. These recommendations are carefully made on the basis of objective facts: increasing the mental health budget will enable the Department of Health and Human Services to serve 10,000 more veterans, the new antidiscrimination law will mean 500 more people with disabilities will be hired across the state, or some other factually based argument.

But an op-ed is different. Here you can, and often should, use moral claims in your arguments. It's not just that the new mental health program will serve more veterans; it's that those veterans *deserve* mental health care. They went into harm's way to protect us and now we should protect them. It's *wrong* to discriminate against people with disabilities, so we *should* make laws to protect them. Morality matters in public policy, and op-eds are one of the few places that center a frank discussion of it.

USING SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY TO ENGAGE THE OTHER SIDE ON MORAL ISSUES

The social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that there are five fundamental values present in all human societies: fairness, harm, loyalty, authority, and sanctity (Haidt, 2013). Almost everyone agrees that it is important for public policies to be fair and not to harm others.[1] But there is disagreement between the right and the left on the importance of the other three values. Conservatives resonate much more strongly with appeals to loyalty, authority, and sanctity than do liberals. There is a reason why American flags are so much more common at a NASCAR race than at an academic conference (loyalty), environmental groups have so much trouble working together (authority isn't a value), and conservatives work to keep illegal drugs illegal (they care a lot about the sanctity of the human body).

Understanding these differences can be helpful when trying to frame an issue that cuts across a partisan divide in an op-ed. For example, instead of pitching gun control as an issue that will protect everyone, liberals could try talking more about how gun control could help protect police officers (authority figures). Conservatives could try to interest liberals more in pro-life perspectives by shifting their sanctity-centered rhetoric, with which liberals don't resonate, to discussions of how abortions disproportionally affect minority communities (fairness).[2]

You Can Be Literary

Another major difference between op-eds and the other genres of policy writing is that they are designed to be written by real people with a point of view on a subject. This means that you can write more conversationally than you might in other contexts. For example, you can write in the first person. And you can use memorable anecdotes from your own personal experience as you'll see one of the examples below.

Additionally, your writing doesn't have to be in the neutral tone that is required in other policy writing. You can have opinions and express them. You can use judgmental words like *inappropriate, suitable,* or *luxurious*. Your op-ed should take a clear, provocative stand about how policy surrounding your issue should be different. Op-eds are not about being balanced and nuanced. Rather, they are about advocating for a particular policy position. To do this, you should briefly acknowledge the viewpoints of the other side before rebutting them, but you shouldn't give them more than one or two brief paragraphs. The op-ed is about asserting your opinions, not theirs.

Finally, if you are feeling particularly literary, you can use irony, wit, paradox, or metaphor—just be careful not to be mean spirited or ugly in your writing (Garfinkle, 2012). You're unlikely to change minds by demeaning people or being ugly toward things that are important to them.

Your Opinion Matters *and* the Facts Still Count

While op-eds should be peppy and opinionated, it is also crucially important that they be factually correct. Newspapers have a responsibility to publish credible points of view. A good op-ed contains lots of solid facts, even if they are not cited in the final version of the paper. For example, the *New York Times* often requires 25 citations for an op-ed. Yours need not be that well researched, but your submitted op-ed should cite a variety of solid sources, even though they won't appear in the final, printed product. The printed version will not contain your sources but the online version will often link directly to sources that can provide greater context for your readers.

Balance the Prescriptive and the Descriptive

The rough rule of thumb for op-eds is two-thirds descriptive material (history, facts, anecdotes, etc.) and one-third prescriptive material. Use the descriptive material to explain the issue to the audience. For example, if you start with an anecdote about discrimination against a particular disabled person, then explain to the reader how the anecdote is part of a broader trend. Use the prescriptive material to explain why it matters and what should be done about it. You can put the prescriptive material at the front of the op-ed, at the back, or sandwiched in the middle, depending on which works best.

Create a Lede (Narrative Hook) That Grabs Your Audience

Like all public policy writing, you don't have the luxury of a captive audience. Newspaper readers are thumbing through the paper over breakfast or skimming the website during a break at work. To get them interested in your topic it's important to have a *lede* (newspaper speak for a narrative hook) that is reflected in the title as well as in the first paragraph. Think, *What's the newsworthy element of this topic that most people haven't seen? How am I going to interest them in it?*

There are lots of effective techniques for doing this. One of the easiest is to *look for a timely tie-in to your issue.* What is hot in the current news cycle? A recent chemical spill in the news is a chance to revisit the consequences of a recent regulatory action. What will be discussed soon? If you're writing about discrimination, readers might be particularly interested around August 6, the anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1965. If you're writing about homelessness, look to tie into a study that was just released with shocking or encouraging results. Finally, you could use a current pop culture reference to draw people in (Op-Ed Project, n.d.). *House of Cards* might be a nice lede for an op-ed on political corruption. Or Apu, the convenience store owner in *The Simpsons*, might connect with readers when discussing the harm South Asians experience when they are stereotyped.

Another effective way to draw readers into an op-ed is to write from a deeply personal experience, so *look for a way to use personal experience and personal voice.* What got

you interested in the issue? What did you experience as you researched it? How could these personal experiences tie into broader issues for society? For example, moving to a new state might give you fresh perspective on how inefficient government might be. An encounter with a bully or bigot might serve as an entrée into an op-ed on racial tensions. If you had a harrowing health experience, you might be well positioned to write about the need for health education. Consider using your personal experiences to capture the audience's attention.

Limitations of the Genre

While op-eds allow freedoms that other genres do not, there are some tight stylistic restrictions by which you have to abide. First and most important, there are strict word limits. Major papers never accept op-eds over 850 words, and many papers have a 700-word limit. Make sure your op-ed fits in the framework of the paper to which you are submitting.

Second, long paragraphs are particularly bad form because the columns of a newspaper make them look unending. Instead, limit all of your paragraphs to just a few sentences and strive to create really short paragraphs; even the occasional one-sentence paragraph will do (Garfinkle, 2012). For similar formatting reasons, figures, tables, headers, and other formatting tools are out as well. Finally, op-eds are the wrong place for a lot of quotes. Use one short quote per op-ed at most, two if you absolutely must have them (Garfinkle, 2012). People are reading the piece for what you have to say, not somebody else.

EXAMPLE OP-EDS

While all op-eds need to abide by the principles listed above, there is still a lot of leeway in how they are written. As a result, no two op-eds are the same, and wildly different ones can be successful. Like issue briefs, this lack of a firm format can feel either paralyzing or freeing, depending on your temperament. But before you make a decision about which camp you fall in, let's take a look at a couple of examples so you can get a sense of the genre.

Example 1: "Don't Get Sick Past July"

The first example appears below. Take a few minutes to read over it and mark up what stands out to you. As you go through it, keep the norms of an op-ed listed earlier in the chapter in mind. Think about where the writer followed them and where she deviated. Consider if these choices made her more effective in educating you about the topic and agreeing with her about her conclusions.

"Don't Get Sick Past July"

Continued Lack of Funding Stains a Failing Health System for America's First People

Evelyn Immonen, Policy Analyst

November 13, 2017

Growing up on a reservation, there are a few rules you learn to live by. If you've got any elderly relatives, make sure they live with an able-bodied adult and a car with a tank full of gas because the ambulance isn't going to make it. If you want an appointment, call at 7 a.m. the day of. Days when the Indian Health Service (IHS) is doing free dental sealants for kids, make sure you're in line with any nieces or nephews you've got. But most important of all, don't get sick past July.

That's because the IHS receives a set amount of money each year to take care of 2.2 million people—no matter the need. American Indians have the lowest health outcomes of any population in the country. Yet compared to other populations, funding is nowhere close to where it needs to be in order to address the needs of those who were here first.

American Indians today have a life expectancy of 4.4 years less than the population at large. They die from alcoholism at five times the rate of the average American, nearly twice the rate from diabetes, and are 138% more likely to die of unintentional injuries.

If that's not enough to argue for a better funded health system, then perhaps fatal disease rates are: mortality rates from cervical cancer are 1.2 times the average, from pneumonia are 1.4 times the average, and maternal deaths are 1.4 times the average. Many of these diseases would be preventable with early, regular care—the care that's being put on hold when resources are scarce.

A GAO report in 2016 on patient care at the IHS was prompted by congressional reports that IHS patients were made to wait for months on end for primary care and days even in emergencies. The GAO exposed that the agency doesn't have metrics in place to assess wait times, let alone improve them. As a result, IHS has implemented a minimum wait time of 28 days for primary care and 48 hours for emergency care. While measurements won't come in for another several years, the agency's ability to single-handedly deliver quality care with a cost ceiling is unknown.

When the government doesn't have enough funding to support the next patient, the IHS implements a waitlist, reprioritizes care, or goes into debt. That debt keeps growing, not only in the direct costs of providing health care, but also from the wear and tear of facilities. Deficiencies in resources to address ongoing operations,

such as equipment, facilities, and maintenance, get added to backlog expenditures. The backlog is currently $515 billion.

The IHS, like other partner agencies including the Bureau of Indian Affairs, emerged from a trust relationship with the federal government, where American Indian tribes are both self-sovereign governments and wards of the state. The visual image often called to mind is indifferent Indian agents distributing rations as tribal members wait in line, hungry and cold. Since before the 1800s where at least one set of rations included smallpox-infected blankets, American Indians have remained behind in health. Smallpox and tuberculosis evolved into alcoholism, diabetes, and cancer, but the modern health care system ultimately retains the same character as those original rations.

The government continues to fall short of its responsibilities. At the current rate of IHS funding, the government spends $2,849 per patient, compared to health care spending equivalent to $7,717 for the general population. Yes, even prisoners receive more funding than Natives.

This remains true despite evidence that poor health outcomes increase costs in issue areas like job employment, education, and housing. Poor housing conditions are associated with a range of negative health outcomes, including mental health, injuries, respiratory illnesses, and lead poisoning. For American Indians, 30% of housing is overcrowded, with as many as 20 family members packed into a single home. While overcrowded conditions might exacerbate health conditions, they also may be due to them as relatives are afraid of leaving family members uncared for.

Now, with an ongoing debate in Congress over health care and budgeting and the Thanksgiving holidays around the corner, it's more important than ever to discuss that what the average American has to be thankful for remains a pipedream for American Indians relying on the IHS. A system that was already underfunded is being severely damaged by ongoing sequestration and budget caps. Left as is, the IHS will continue to fall victim to the fiscal constraints of the federal budget, unable to provide the benefits promised to its beneficiaries.

Discussion of Example 1

Whew. What do you think? First of all, it's worth acknowledging that the op-ed deals with a particularly heavy topic, especially if you are a Native American or have friends or family that are a member of a tribe. Part of what makes it feel heavy is that the writing helps you feel the moral weight of the topic. The author points out that the IHS violates some of our key values. It doesn't seem fair that the government spends $2,849 per patient, compared to health care spending equivalent to $7,717 for the general population. It doesn't seem fair that Native Americans die at such higher rates than others. It

also seems harmful to cut off health care in July. As you can see, the author does a nice job of making moral points about the dysfunction of the IHS and buttresses this moral issue with facts and figures.

The second thing worth noticing is how effective the lede is. The author immediately grabs your interest with a series of anecdotes that you likely haven't thought of, even though they make sense, and then surprises you with a final one that doesn't seem to make sense. This disconnect then motivates you to read the rest of the article to understand it, which is also why it makes for such an effective title. She also uses the lede to imply that she knows a lot about growing up on a reservation. The lede is personal, but the op-ed quickly turns to the larger problem. It's an effective strategy here.

What could the author have done better? My main critique is that the author pulls her punch at the end. She's convinced me that this situation is morally appalling and should change, but she hasn't recommended how. She should have seized her chance to ask for something more than a discussion. She should have asked for change. The writing could also improve in a couple of spots (as you may have noticed) using the lessons of Chapters 3 and 4.

Example 2: "Time to End Virginia's Death Penalty"

For the second example, let's turn to a different issue: the death penalty. As you know, different states in the United States have different policies. In solidly red or blue states (dominated by Republicans or Democrats, respectively), the death penalty is largely a settled issue with neither party interested in changing its viewpoint. For purple states like Virginia where Republicans and Democrats have won statewide elections in recent years, the issue is more open. In 2021 a bipartisan bill banning the death penalty began to make its way through the state house. Two students in one of my classes decided they wanted to make the issue their research project for the semester. At the end of it, they wrote and submitted the following op-ed. Take a few minutes to read it through. As you do so, keep the norms of an op-ed discussed earlier in the chapter in mind. Think about where the writers followed them and where they deviated. Consider if these choices made them more effective in educating you about their topic and agreeing with them about their conclusions.

Time to End Virginia's Death Penalty

January 2, 2021

By Sean Bielawski and Henry Frost

In the upcoming legislative session, Virginia can build a bipartisan cultural bridge and set an example for the South by officially and completely abolishing the death penalty.

In the last 20 years, prosecutors, juries, judges, politicians, and citizens from both sides of the aisle have decided that the death penalty is the wrong choice for the commonwealth, and use of the death penalty has continuously dwindled to the point of being obsolete.

Executions are increasingly rare in Virginia, with five executions in the last 10 years and only two people currently sitting on death row. Still, this mostly dormant practice can be reactivated at any time as long as it remains on the books.

To further emphasize why the commonwealth should abolish the death penalty, we could lay out the arguments various groups have made for abolition over the last few decades.

We could argue that the death penalty is ineffective, pointing out that there is no evidence the death penalty deters crimes, that social science research has debunked the deterrent effect and that nearly 90 percent of criminologists agree.

Or we could point out it is unjust. The death penalty has been applied in a wildly discriminatory fashion, with Black Americans executed at far greater rates than white Americans despite no connection to the actual rate of criminal activity. Indeed, 96% of reviews have found evidence of racial discrimination. Furthermore, hundreds of Americans have been found innocent while on death row or even after their deaths, showing the inherent risk of killing innocent people that comes when you put life and death decisions like capital punishment in the government's hands.

We could also argue that it is arcane, that Virginia first executed someone in 1608 and most of Virginia's executions occurred between the time Virginia was settled as a colony and the end of the 1800s.

Or we could point out that it is expensive, that it costs more to execute someone than life imprisonment. These estimates range from being 30% more expensive to ten times as expensive, demonstrating an unnecessary drag on taxpayer resources that could be returned to our pockets or spent on needed upgrades to our schools or infrastructure.

We could also note that the United States executes more civilians than any country other than China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Iraq, or Egypt.

Or we could argue that the death penalty runs counter to both liberal and conservative values, and there is support for abolition on both sides of the aisle.

Conservatives point out the conflict between the death penalty and pro-life values. Senator Bill Stanley (R) of Franklin County said during a floor debate, "We do not

have the power our Creator has to take life. We do not have the ability, morally, legally or otherwise."

Liberals argue that the death penalty is another symptom of a racially discriminatory criminal justice system.

Both sides agree it is unwise to protect any system that is both ineffective and wastes tax dollars.

But while these arguments are compelling, the truth is that these arguments hardly still apply in Virginia because Virginia essentially no longer uses the death penalty.

At the Federal level, the same was once true. But that changed this year when the government enacted its first execution since 2003. Starting with Daniel Lewis Lee on July 14 and ending with Alfred Bourgeois on December 11, we have now seen ten executions this year after a 17-year hiatus. If the currently scheduled executions take place in December, that will make 10 federal executions in one calendar year after a 17-year hiatus.

This notable increase in executions provides a grim but useful reminder of why it is important for Virginia to capture this current moment of bipartisan opposition to the death penalty and turn the page on a dark chapter in the Commonwealth's history, a history that has seen more executions than any other state since its founding in 1607, and sits second only to Texas with its 113 executions since 1976.

Frankly, the debate around the death penalty is a hollow one, as both sides have realized it's time to move on. This year offers the opportunity to do so. It is time to codify what the Commonwealth has already decided in practice. Virginia can be a leader in the region and become the first Southern state to abolish the death penalty, rendering this ineffective, wasteful, unjust, and arcane practice formally obsolete. The Commonwealth has already moved on from the death penalty. It's time to make it official.

Discussion of Example 2

What do you think? The first thing you might notice is your own reaction to the piece. My guess is that you've had a strong one. You care. You might not agree with the conclusion but, more than likely, you are engaged. That's a sign of success for this op-ed.

Second, you might notice how the authors make the case that the death penalty is abolished in practice over the first two-thirds of the piece before setting up a call to action at the end. That's the two-thirds/one-third rule that we talked about before. It's the contrast with the renewed federal executions during the Trump administration that make this issue relevant *now*.

A third thing to notice is where it was published. The students thought about submitting the op-ed to the *Washington Post* (which has a large circulation in liberal

Northern Virginia) but instead opted to publish it in the *Roanoke Times*, which circulates in some of the most conservative regions of the states. They didn't need to convince a liberal audience, they wanted to engage a conservative one and so chose a paper that put their argument in front of people who matter on this issue.

Finally, while this op-ed does a lot of things right, I wonder if it could be improved in a few spots. First, it could be improved by bringing the information at the end closer up to the beginning. That the Trump administration resumed executing federal prisoners is a major part of the story and could have been more of the lede. Second, I didn't love the repeated rhetorical flourish of "or we could point out." They are pointing it out, so why not say so? But that said, these two students published an op-ed in an important paper while this issue was being considered by decision-makers. Even with some room for improvement, this was a big win.

Example 3: "Protecting the Gift of Cooperative Preschools"

For the third example, let's look at an op-ed that I wrote as a part of a campaign to pass a bill in the Virginia state legislature. Take a few minutes to read it through. As you go through it, keep the norms of an op-ed listed earlier in the chapter in mind. Think about where I followed them and where I deviated. Consider if these choices helped the piece effectively educate you about the topic, persuade you to care about it, and agree with my recommendations.

"Protecting the Gift of Cooperative Preschools"

By Andrew Pennock

I am a college professor. During the school year, I teach students at the University of Virginia—giving lectures, leading workshops, and helping prepare graduate students for public policy-related careers in Richmond, D.C., and around the world.

But one day a month I teach a very different group of students. I walk with my twin 5-year-olds into the basement of St. Paul's Church, directly across from Thomas Jefferson's Rotunda. And instead of teaching 22–25-year-olds, I stay and serve as a co-op assistant for the 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds at Chancellor's Street Cooperative Preschool.

I stand at the door and greet each of the 24 children by name. During morning meeting, I sit on the floor and learn about the theme of the month from the teacher (recent favorites include music theory, geology, and insects). During play time, I help kids learn to count as they play grocery store. During snack, I'm the waiter—serving carrots I cut the night before—as the children practice their manners. During music and movement, I dance the silly dances that an adult can only do with a preschooler.

It's a privilege and a gift to be a part of my children's early education. I'm grateful for the chance to know their friends and teachers. I get to help my neighbors' children develop, and my children learn from dozens of remarkable adults with different gifts and talents. Andy, the manager of a local pizza shop, hosts a yearly field trip that my 5-year-olds can't stop talking about. The local musicians give my children the musical education I dreamed of as a child.

It's a remarkable community, but it's not unique. Every morning, all across the commonwealth, this scene is repeated in more than 40 communities with co-op preschools. Parents take time out of busy schedules to educate their children and their neighbors' children under the guidance of trained and certified lead teachers who form the backbone of each school. It's a remarkable system that has been alive in Virginia for more than 70 years.

But this system is threatened by new rules written by the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) and passed by the State Board of Social Services in December. Ignoring decades of research that parental involvement is a key indicator of child success, VDSS is tripling the training requirements for parents to participate as co-op assistants. This change is as unfortunate as it is unneeded.

The rule change will have three impacts. First, it will drive working parents away from co-ops. Imagine telling parents that in order to serve snacks and sing songs, you and your partner must complete a total of 24 hours of training. Parents will stop co-oping and the community aspect of these beautiful preschools will evaporate.

Second, every family with multiple children enrolled (twins in my case) will have to leave. Parents who co-op more than 8 hours a month are now classified as full-time staff requiring 64 hours of training per family in the first year.

Finally, and most tragically, fewer children will attend preschool. As parents stop co-oping, the preschools will have to raise their prices to hire more full-time staff. Co-ops are often 60% of the cost of comparable high-quality programs and the low cost makes a huge difference to young parents, especially low-income parents.

These new rules will hurt families, but they won't increase safety. According to VDSS inspectors, co-ops have exemplary safety records. VDSS records for 31 randomly selected co-ops and 31 non-co-op early childhood programs from 2013 to 2018 show that co-ops had two complaint violations while the non-co-cops had 57.

Of course co-ops are safe. Every day a parent is in the room, watching out for the safety of his or her child with the hawkish eye that only a parent can bring.

Thankfully, many legislators recognize that this aspect of the new policy hurts children and families far more than it helps them. It's not a partisan issue to believe

> that parents are great preschool assistants. It's common sense. Sens. Thomas K. Norment Jr., Scott Surovell, and Creigh Deeds; Dels. Brenda Pogge, David Toscano, and Steve Landes; and many Republicans and Democrats support House Bill 2258, which will keep the current training requirements for co-op parents that have been in place for the last 14 years.
>
> I hope they succeed. As a working parent with two kids in preschool, I want to launch my children into a lifetime of learning about bugs, music, and science. It's been a joy to serve my community by dancing silly dances with my neighbors' kids. I hope I can do that next year.

Discussion of Example 3

What did you think? Be honest. Your learning is more important than my feelings!

As you can see, this op-ed takes a different approach than the first two. Instead of opening by focusing on the general thrust of a policy challenge, it opens with a story about my own experience. That story, with all the particular details about our little preschool, is meant to draw the reader in, give them context, and provide a vision for the good. You'll also note that I've framed this as moral challenge here: will the state legislature protect these beautiful schools?

Like the previous example, the effectiveness of this op-ed is enhanced by when and where it was published. On the day it was published, I had been working with the Virginia Cooperative Preschool Association for over a year. I'd written issue briefs, given testimony, and talked to many legislators. The bill to protect the schools was actually heard in committee the same day this was published in the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, the main paper in our state capital. Everyone reads it. As I lobbied that morning, multiple elected officials said, "oh, you're the guy from the paper this morning!" It did its job of introducing the issue (and me) to the people making the decision.

How could it have been more effective? One could argue that I didn't present both sides of the story. Surely the antagonist in my story, the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS), had reasons for pursuing this policy change. What were they?

I didn't talk about their reasons in the op-ed for two reasons. First, I had limited space to make my case. I wanted it to be memorable and so focused on conveying a picture of what a cooperative preschool is like rather than conveying a lot of the details. Telling their story in this limited space would mean not telling mine. Second, VDSS is a large, connected, and powerful organization. They can (and did) tell their own story using their cadre of lobbyists. It wasn't my job to tell it for them!

I'll point out that while this op-ed was helpful, it wouldn't have been enough on its own to get the bill passed and save these 40 preschools. Success came from an enormous amount of work gathering data (some of which you saw in the op-ed) and shaping arguments to put into different policy documents, then putting those arguments (orally and in documents) in front of decision-makers and the public. When I went

door to door in the state capitol, I went equipped with an issue brief with a legislative history embedded in it. Every senator and delegate I talked to asked me about VDSS's position, particularly as their lobbying team was out in force against the bill. Success was facilitated by using different policy writing genres to make our case, including this widely read op-ed.

CONCLUSION: WRITING (AND PUBLISHING!) YOUR OWN OP-ED

As you've seen from the three examples, while op-eds can differ greatly in terms of style and topic, following some core rules is key to successfully engaging the readers of a newspaper with your ideas. The good news is that you can write one as well.[3]

Once you've written one, you'll have to follow a few more steps to get it published. The first step is to select a paper to which to submit. Most important is to figure out who you want to sway about your issue. If you're interested in affecting policy in your city, don't submit first to national newspapers, even though they might have bigger names; instead, write for your city's major paper. Not only will it be more likely to be read by the people who matter, you're also much more likely to be selected for publication, as national newspapers receive hundreds of submissions a week—much more than the average city paper.

Most papers have directions about how to submit op-eds on their websites. Follow their directions for submission, taking care to be professional about your submission (i.e., follow their rules and be polite). One professional best practice is to submit your op-ed to only one paper at a time. If you haven't heard back within a week, then you should assume it won't be used and you are free to submit it to other places.[4]

Don't be discouraged if your op-ed doesn't get picked up by the first paper to which you submit it. If the *Los Angeles Times* isn't interested (circulation ~800,000), the *Sacramento Bee* (circulation ~300,000) might be. If it is picked up, you'll work with the op-ed editor and their staff on your writing so that your points will shine through on the printed page.

Finally, don't be discouraged if even when it's published you don't feel like your op-ed changed the trajectory of your issue. Even professional op-ed columnists have trouble getting their audience to engage in important stories (Kristof, 2017). Remember, you're participating in the long, hard work of creating change by educating and persuading with an op-ed. Raising the profile of your issue is a lengthy process, and an op-ed is one step in laying the groundwork for effective change. Use your op-ed to keep creating change on your problem, one step at a time.

CHECKLIST

Content

- Have a clear vision of what unique and provocative perspective you're bringing to your issue.
- Create an attention-grabbing title.
- Have a narrative hook to capture the audience's attention.
- Stay within the word limit for the paper to which you are submitting (usually between 700 and 850 words).
- Include sources to support your claims.

Writing

- Directed to an intelligent reader unfamiliar with specifics of topic.
- Short, precise, readable sentences that are actor centered.
- Paragraphs are cohesive, coherent, and properly emphasize important ideas.
- Discussion flows logically.
- No grammar or spelling errors.
- No jargon.
- Passes *Washington Post* test.

EXERCISES

1. Identify a newspaper where it would be helpful for you to publish an op-ed on your topic. Why is this the right paper for an op-ed written by you on your topic?
2. Read three to five op-eds published recently in that newspaper (preferably on your topic, if you can). What do you notice about them? Who wrote them? What makes them effective or ineffective? Do they represent the point of view that you bring to the issue?
3. Write an op-ed on your issue employing the principles from this chapter. Decide what kind of lede you want to use and which facts will be most helpful in providing evidence for your claims. Decide if you want to use one of the moral foundations discussed earlier in the chapter as a framework for your argument.
4. Submit your op-ed to a newspaper.
5. Write an op-ed that argues against yours. What moral claims would you make? What evidence would you marshal?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Garfinkle, A. (2012). Political writing: A guide to the essentials (1st ed.). Routledge

Gawande, A. (2015). *Being mortal: Illness, medicine and what matters in the end* ((int ed.) ed.). Picador.

Gray-Little, B., & Nelms, D. W. (2018, March 21). *Amazon's HQ3 won't be in the US unless something changes. The Hill.* http://thehill.com/opinion/education/379532-amazons-hq3-wont-be-in-the-us-unless-something-changes

Haidt, J. (2013). The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion. reprint. Vintage

Haidt, J. (n.d). *The moral roots of liberals and conservatives.* https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_on_the_moral_mind

Hall, T. (2013, October 13). *Op-ed and you. New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/14/opinion/op-ed-and-you.html

Kristof, N. (2017, December 21). *My worst columns. New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/21/opinion/nicholas-kristof-worst-columns.html

May, T. (2012). *Op-eds: Writing for social change (Electronic Hallway).* Evans School of Public Affairs, University of Washington.

Op-Ed Project. (n.d). *Op-ed writing: Tips and tricks.* https://www.theopedproject.org/oped-basics/

Shipley, D. (2004, February 1). *And now a word from op-ed. New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/01/opinion/01SHIP.html

Stone, D. (2011). *Policy paradox: The art of political decision making* (3rd ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.

Tumin, R. (2017, December 3). *The op-ed pages, explained. New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/03/insider/opinion-op-ed-explainer.html