

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Tips for Aspiring Op-Ed Writers

Bret Stephens AUG. 25, 2017

As a summertime service for readers of the editorial pages who may wish someday to write for them, here's a list of things I've learned over the years as an editor, op-ed writer and columnist.

1) A wise editor once observed that the easiest decision a reader can make is to stop reading. This means that every sentence has to count in grabbing the reader's attention, starting with the first. Get to the point: Why does your topic matter? Why should it matter *today*? And why should the reader care what you, of all people, have to say about it?

2) The ideal reader of an op-ed is the ordinary subscriber — a person of normal intelligence who will be happy to learn something from you, provided he can readily understand what you're saying. It is for a broad community of people that you must write, not the handful of fellow experts you seek to impress with high-flown jargon, the intellectual rival you want to put down with a devastating aside or the V.I.P. you aim to flatter with an oleaginous adjective.

3) The purpose of an op-ed is to offer an opinion. It is not a news analysis or a weighing up of alternative views. It requires a clear thesis, backed by rigorously marshaled evidence, in the service of a persuasive argument. Harry Truman once quipped that he wished he could hire only one-handed economists — just to get away from their “on the one hand, on the other” advice. Op-ed pages are for one-handed writers.

4) Authority matters. Readers will look to authors who have standing, either because they have expertise in their field or unique experience of a subject. If you can offer neither on a given topic you should not write about it, however passionate your views may be. Opinion editors are often keen on writers who can provide standing-with-surprise: the well-known environmentalist who supports nuclear power; the right-wing politician who favors transgender rights; the African-American scholar who opposes affirmative action.

5) Younger writers with no particular expertise or name recognition are likelier to get published by following an 80-20 rule: 80 percent new information; 20 percent opinion.

6) An op-ed should never be written in the style of a newspaper column. A columnist is a generalist, often with an idiosyncratic style, who *performs* for his readers. An op-ed contributor is a specialist who seeks only to inform them.

7) Avoid the passive 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.

8) Be *proleptic*, a word that comes from the Greek for “anticipation.” That is, get the better of the major objection to your argument by raising and answering it in advance. Always offer the other side’s strongest case, not the straw man. Doing so will sharpen your own case and earn the respect of your reader.

9) Sweat the small stuff. Read over each sentence — read it aloud — and ask yourself: Is this true? Can I defend every single word of it? Did I get the facts, quotes, dates and spellings exactly right? Yes, sometimes those spellings are hard: the president of Turkmenistan is Gurbanguly Malikgulyevich Berdymukhammedov. But, believe me, nothing’s worse than having to run a correction.

10) You’re not Proust. Keep your sentences short and your paragraphs tight.

11) A newspaper has a running conversation with its readers. Before pitching an op-ed you should know when the paper last covered that topic, and how your piece will advance the discussion.

12) Kill the clichés. If you want to give the reader an *outside the box* perspective on how to solve a *problem from hell* by *reimagining the policy toolbox* to include *stakeholder voices* — well, stop right there. Editors notice these sorts of expressions the way French chefs notice slices of Velveeta cheese: repulsive in themselves, and indicative of the mental slop that lies beneath.

13) If you find writing easy, you're doing it wrong. One useful tip for aspiring writers comes from the film "A River Runs Through It," in which the character played by Tom Skerritt, a Presbyterian minister with a literary bent, receives essays from his children and instructs them to make each successive draft "half as long." If you want to write a successful 700-word op-ed, start with a longer draft, then cut and cut again. "The art of writing," believed the minister, "lay in thrift."

14) The editor is always right. She's especially right when she axes the sentences or paragraphs of which you're most proud. Treat your editor with respect by not second-guessing her judgment, belaboring her with requests for publication decisions or submitting sloppy work in the expectation that she will whip it into shape.

15) I'd wish you luck, but good writing depends on conscious choices, not luck. Make good choices.

I invite you to follow me on Facebook.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on August 26, 2017, on Page A17 of the New York edition with the headline: Tips for Aspiring Op-Ed Writers.