

10/25/2023

Writing Effective Op-Eds: A Training for Researchers

Q&A

Questions Not Answered During the Webinar

- **What is an example of a "cliche" and "passive voice"?**

Bret Stephens from NYTimes gives this example of clichés: “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.”

Passive voice:

Use active voice: subject - verb – object or “who did what to whom.” Active voice offers transparency (you know who is responsible and who is affected); it increases understanding and comprehension. Passive voice does not sound smarter. It obfuscates.

Passive voice/ Active voice examples

- Paradise was paved and a parking lot put up. / They paved paradise and put up a parking lot. – Joni Mitchell
- The sheriff was shot by me. / I shot the sheriff. – Bob Marley
- It was determined by the committee that the report was inconclusive. / The committee [or “We”] determined that the report is inconclusive.

A corollary of “use active voice” is avoid “there are/is” construction – almost always wordy and weak. So, “There are too many cultural, religious, and societal differences that make developing ...” vs. “Too many cultural, religious, and societal differences make ...” or “There are 925 million hungry people around the world” vs. “More than 900 million people live in hunger ...”

- **What’s a publisher vs the editor? How do we know whose interest we need to pique?**

The publisher is the boss of the entire news organization, kind of like a CEO. In the case of The Seattle Times, our publisher is also the owner. Each department has editors that oversee staffers and make coverage decisions - news, sports, business, features, op-eds, editorial. The editor of the op-eds section is the person you want to reach.

- **For Melissa: How many op-ed pitches do you get each day/week?**

Since June, when I started this job, I’ve received anywhere from five to 10 in a day. Plus I receive questions and re-edits from writers who have had work turned back, and inquiries from people who have not written a full op-ed yet but want to know if I am interested. (I tell them I can’t accept anything I haven’t seen but I welcome the chance to read their submission.) I also get the occasional complaint.

- **What is the typical length of a good op-ed? (e.g., 1-2 pages? 1,000 words?)**
Lengths vary from outlet to outlet, so check with the requirements for the outlet you are working with. In general, lengths run between 600-800 words.
- **I'm glad you mentioned comments on Op-Ed pieces. What do editors prefer in terms of engagement with comments? Is potential for engagement something you consider when deciding to publish an Op-Ed? I've noticed there is usually a lot of negative engagement with pieces on expanding Federal nutrition programs.**
Every editor's dream is that the comments will be respectful, share accurate information and stay on topic. It is sadly a dream left unfulfilled. I rely on my news judgment – what do people need to know/want to know – more than the potential for comments. (If I told you the stories that garnered the most comments in our history, you'd never believe it.) I do have the power to disallow comments or turn them off once everyone starts misbehaving.
- **What is the monetization for writing something like this? How much does someone get paid to do this? Who typically pays them?**
Op-eds are unpaid submissions.
- **Jim, what strategies might higher ed institutions employ to help shift researchers' mindsets from 'plain' academic language to one that resonates to the public?**
The most useful approaches are to offer trainings, resources and individual help editing documents. Many media relations offices at universities provide these supports. Check to see what your institution offers. Some examples:

 - <https://communicators.duke.edu/writing-media/writing-effective-op-eds/>
 - <https://mitcommlab.mit.edu/broad/commkit/op-ed/>
 - https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hks-communications-program/files/new_seglin_how_to_write_an_oped_1_25_17_7.pdf
 - <https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2020/05/04/writing-submitting-opinion-piece/>
- **How much research do you include within your op-ed to demonstrate credibility?**
It is useful to include a focused, limited set of facts/evidence to define the problem and support your solution, Research studies can be included as one type of evidence. You can either summarize the findings with a statement (e.g., “Numerous studies show that sugary drink taxes reduce sales of taxed beverages.”) or cite a specific study (e.g., “A study by researchers at University of Washington showed that XYZ”). Include hyperlink to study.
- **Must all op-eds be making a recommendation?**
No, op-eds that share new information relevant to audience are fine. Or those that counter misinformation or a prior op-ed.
- **What would you consider an effective op-ed? How do you define "effective"?**
An effective op-ed convinces readers that your point of view is valid and sways them to agree with it/support it.

- **How do you balance writing with your careers in medicine, public health, and research?**

I see writing op-eds (and communicating with the public and policy makers in general) as a key part of my academic and public health work. Communication is a way to increase the impact of my work in the bigger world outside of academia. I want my work to make a difference, to improve community health and advance health equity. Communications is a key final step in any research project I do. So I prioritize making time for this.

- **I'm interested in learning strategies I can use to convince writing collaborators that a different style of writing is necessary for venues such as those you will be discussing.**

Share some of the resources provided in the question above (what strategies might higher ed institutions employ to help shift researchers' mindsets from 'plain' academic language to one that resonates to the public?)

- **I'm also curious to hear about diversity, equity and inclusion considerations when it comes to writing and pitching.**

I think most outlets keep diversity and inclusion top of mind when reading and inviting submissions. Who can offer a perspective that's different from what we've had before? Who is active in a particular community that we haven't heard from? We don't want pages of wonky political stuff from white cis men/lawmakers/policy experts.

- **How do you balance accuracy and precision with speaking to a wide, non-expert audience?**

Accurate and precise information can be presented using clear, simple, non-technical language. [Social math](#) can help make statistics more comprehensible.

- **How can policymakers get writing support when drafting op-eds?**

The [Op-Ed project](#) has good resources. NGOs working on the policy of interest might have communications staff who could provide assistance.

Other Questions Answered During the Webinar

For answers to these questions, please refer to the [slides and webinar recording](#) (Q&A portion begins at 1:10:30 and ends at 1:28:29).

- **Writing**
 - Do you recommend hiring a writer/editor?
 - How can researchers tap writing help? Do most academic institutions offer such help in shaping op-eds?
 - Does including hyperlinks (to define a concept or when mentioning an organization) make sense in an Op-ed?
- **Career and Expertise**
 - I'm under the impression that I need to be an expert before writing an op-ed (in order to be credible and to make my opinion matter to readers). Is that not true?
 - Do you have recommendations for students/trainees still establishing themselves in the field? How much do you look at credentials when reviewing op-eds?
 - Are op-eds useful to include in CVs? Does it have any academic value or advantage in terms of tenure/promotion or job search?
 - When do you recommend getting your academic institution involved if you know approval will be needed?
- **Timing and Submission**
 - How should timing be considered when submitting an op-ed?
 - Is it best to align with current events or is it ok to just submit a topic of interest?
 - Can you explain the timing of submitting an op-ed that includes results that would go in a publication? Can you submit the op-ed before you publish your paper, or do you need to wait until after the paper is published?
 - Where are good places to submit op-eds?
 - How long does it typically take to get feedback to your writers?
 - I have submitted Op-Eds to the NYT and they don't send a rejection note, but indicate that if you haven't heard back after 5 or so days, you are free to submit elsewhere. The problem is that by that time the Op-Ed may be stale. Is there any alternative approach when submitting to NYT or others that work similarly?
- **Editing Process**
 - Can you discuss the editing/revision process?
 - If an editor suggests changes that impact the Op-Ed substantially (at least in my opinion as author!) can I withdraw it from consideration, or once I submit do I lose that ability?
 - Has there been instances of when you find a good op-ed poorly written and you helped edit it?
- **Controversial Op-Eds**
 - Can you talk about how publishing controversial opinion articles can impact your career and how to write op-eds without burning professional bridges?
 - Can you submit an anonymous op-ed if your opinion differs from that of your organization and you are worried about retaliation?