



Moving the Needle through Commentary: Advanced Opinion Writing

New Canadian Media

Drafted by: Amira Elghawaby




Agenda

- Definitions
- Opinion writing & its opportunities
- What you need to know
- Features of successful columns
- 6 steps to success
- The Formula
- My process – yours, too?
- Your turn




Definitions

- ▶ Op-ed Page: A newspaper's opinion page, traditionally placed opposite the editorial page, hence the name
 - ▶ Opinion articles: Articles giving an opinion or perspective
 - ▶ Op-ed submissions: Articles submitted for publication by nonstaff members
 - ▶ Columns: Regularly appearing articles, typically written by staff, giving an opinion or perspective
 - ▶ Opinion pieces: A generic term to describe all three
- 




3 versions of the same thing

- ▶ Columns: Written regularly, often on the same general topic, usually by the same person, usually a professional, usually paid, and usually worth reading
 - ▶ Opinion articles: Written irregularly, often on a variety of topics, usually written by professionals, sometimes worth reading
 - ▶ Op-ed submissions: Written occasionally, often by PR pros or passionate advocates, submitted voluntarily, usually unpaid.
- 

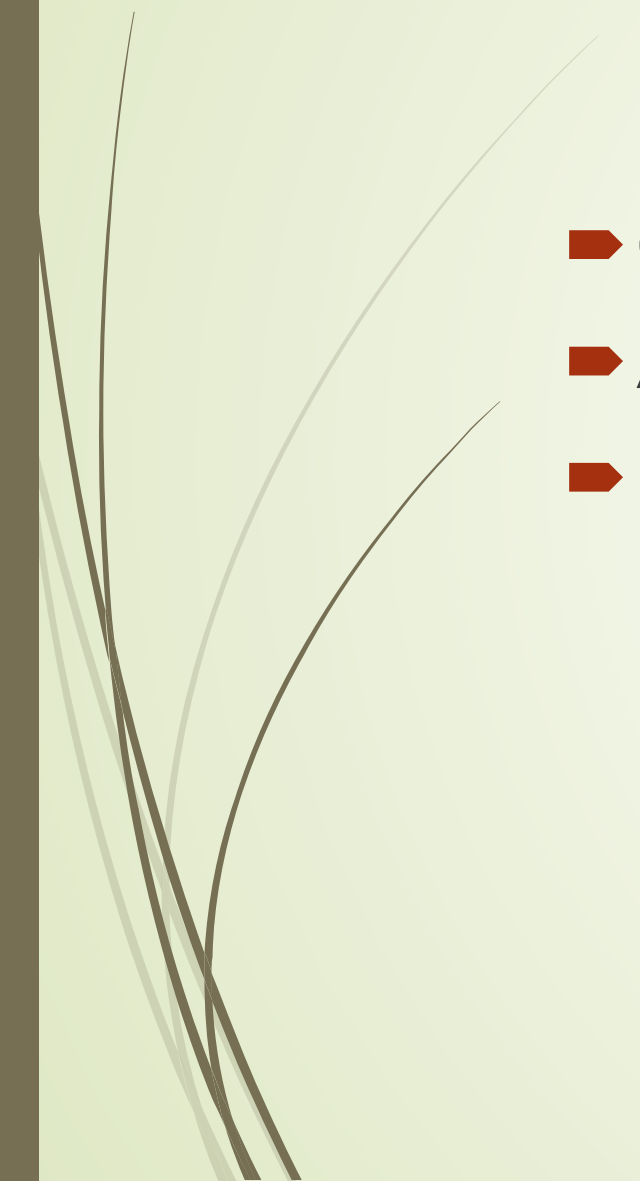


What you need to know

- ▶ Mainstream newspapers and online news sites rely on op-ed submissions from nonemployees to add content.
 - ▶ Therefore, this is an era of opportunity: Staff-poor newspapers and websites benefit from freelance opinion pieces, especially when they don't have to pay, or have to pay one-time payments, rather than for staff.
- 




Why write op-eds?

- Opportunity to get your voice out there
 - Allow you to establish yourself as an expert
 - Permit you to advocate on specific issues
- 




Why NOT to write op-eds?

- Highlight your bias on an issue, making it sometimes impossible to later cover the issue as a reporter.
 - If you want to remain neutral on an issue.
- 




Opinion articles are NOT

- ▶ Hard news: Timely reports of breaking news events
 - ▶ Soft news: News stories that use a delayed-lead structure and may be longer, but are otherwise similar in structure
 - ▶ Editorials: Expressions of the official viewpoint of a publication
 - ▶ A way to make money!
- 




Despite the formula

- ▶ Writing opinion pieces is more art than science
 - ▶ Some of us are bound to be better at it
 - ▶ But it's not rocket science – practice will make you better
 - ▶ Columns, opinion articles and op-ed pieces all have essentially the same qualities in common - READ widely to get a flavor of what you think works.
- 




QUESTIONS

- ▶ Which would you rather read – an op-ed, an opinion article or a column?
 - ▶ Do any of you like to read columns by particular writers? Who?
 - ▶ What, in your view, distinguishes the columns you like from other opinion articles you don't?
- 



Features of successful columns

- ▶ Clearly written and argued
 - ▶ Timely – they're tied to current events and issues
 - ▶ They combine passion and reason
 - ▶ They have a beginning, middle & end
 - ▶ They always reach a conclusion, usually a strong one
- 




6 steps to success

- 1) Open with an attention grabbing lead
- 2) State your argument high in the op-ed, back it up later
- 3) Stick to a single point – don't write about everything
- 4) Briefly acknowledge alternative views – then demolish them
- 5) End cleanly – propose a solution, make a prediction or state a conclusion, don't just peter out
- 6) Keep it tight – 700 words, no more than 800



3 easy pieces

- ▶ Beginning: That engaging lead, make it an “executive summary” of your argument
 - ▶ Middle: Outlines the argument, presents facts and figures, appeals to emotion, attacks opposing views and makes use of traditional journalistic techniques such as interviews, storytelling
 - ▶ End: Restates the argument, offers the solution, prediction or conclusion
- 

BREAKING DOWN AN OP-ED





1. The Lead

- Don't be boring: If the lead fails to engage, readers will run away
- No rules: Leads can be hard or soft, short or long, unconventional
- If you're new to this, go for relatively hard news angle and keep it relatively short
- Sum up the argument to come: Just why are we writing about this?
- Move from specific to general: Describe a specific situation as a dramatic and illustrative way to make a general point
- Questions are allowed! (As in, you may start with one.)




2. The Argument

- ▶ Make your argument clear to readers high in the story
- ▶ Make it no deeper than the second or third paragraph ... and paragraphs should be short!
- ▶ Summarize the argument in no more than one or two sentences
- ▶ State the argument with passion



3. Stick to the point

- ▶ Any good opinion piece is about one topic, even if it's a broad one
 - ▶ Resist the temptation to digress
 - ▶ Don't pile on with too many facts
 - ▶ Weave in quotes from credible sources
 - ▶ Maintain your focus
 - ▶ Remember 650-700 words
- 



Getting back to the argument

- Summarizing the argument is not enough
- Provide examples to support your claims
- This is the place for backing up with facts and figures, but don't overdo it
- But be sure your facts are facts! Research!
- Reporting has a place in opinion
- Good interviews can improve an opinion piece




Acknowledge alternative views

- This is a rhetorical device ... and it covers you
- Be brief about it
- Don't give opponents a chance to say you don't know what you're talking about
- Anticipate objections, and deal with them
- State their views your way – and knock 'em down
- Turn them to make your point
- Try not to be too obvious




4. Anticipate responses

- ▶ End it cleanly with conviction
 - ▶ Propose a solution, make a prediction, or state your conclusions!
 - ▶ If it's meant to be humorous, end it with a joke
- 




5. The Conclusion

- ▶ End it cleanly with conviction
 - ▶ Propose a solution, or ... Make a prediction, or ... State your conclusions!
 - ▶ If it's meant to be humorous, end it with a joke
- 




Keep it tight

- ▶ Op-ed submissions are nowadays often restricted to 700 words on major papers
 - ▶ Why invite editing?
 - ▶ Better you make the cuts than they do
 - ▶ You know what's really important
- 



No footnotes!

- Newspaper columns were invented before hyperlinks
 - Always attribute the source of information in the text
 - Don't provide footnotes
 - Unless you're specifically writing for the Internet, don't provide links
 - Explanatory notes below the copy will get your article spiked
- 



General advice on writing

- Cast your arguments from the reader's perspective – why you should adopt this plan of mine
- Don't be afraid to criticize people and institutions you disagree with
- But keep it respectful – and be aware of defamation law
- Use metaphor and analogy – but not too much!
- Put people first – make arguments about people, not numbers
- Don't be afraid of emotion




More thoughts

- ▶ This isn't news – there's no need to sound exactly like everyone else
- ▶ Why not sound like yourself? Say it your way
- ▶ Tell them something about yourself – why they should listen to you...
- ▶ Keep your head if you disagree with the way your story is edited




Getting it published

- Do your homework
 - Be professional about requirements – find the protocol for submissions and follow it
 - Find out the right person to send it to
 - Follow up – but not too much (don't be needy!)
 - Provide contact information
- 



Reuse and recycle

- ▶ If at first you don't succeed, try again somewhere else
 - ▶ Do local versions
 - ▶ Do a letter-to-the-editor version summarizing key points only
 - ▶ Try different editors
- 

MY PROCESS -- AND NOW, YOURS?



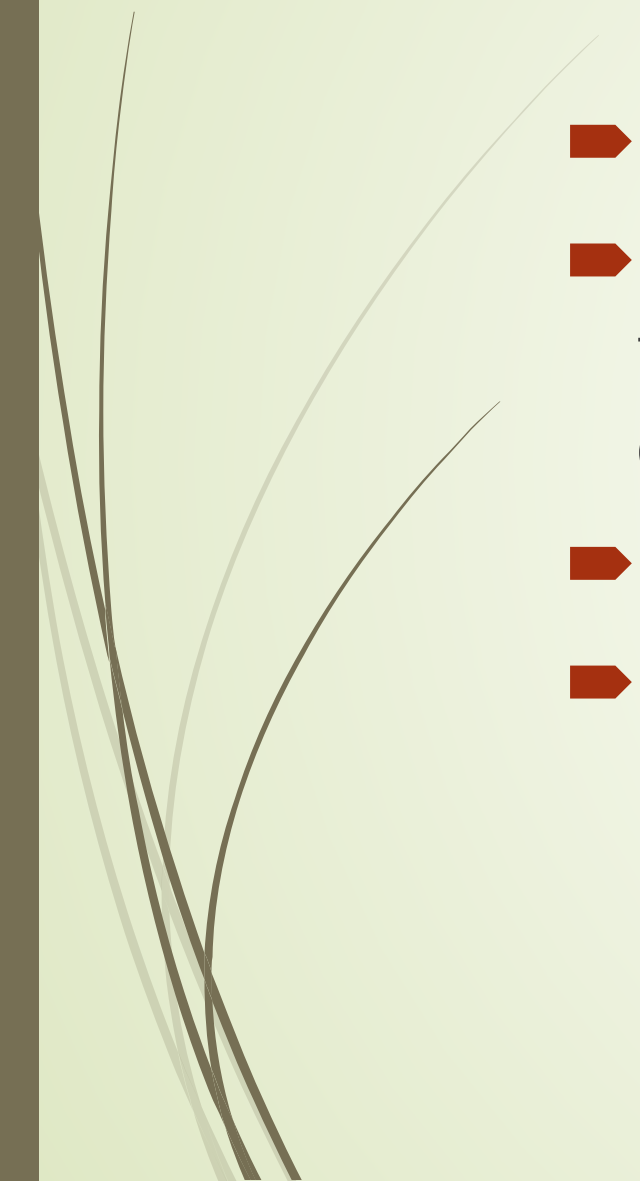


STEP 1: THE IDEA

- What is the idea you want to explore?
- Why do you want to explore it?
- What perspective do you have that is different from any other already out there?
- Why is this idea timely?
- Do I have enough time to write it?




Step 2: DRAFT YOUR INITIAL THOUGHTS

- Think of who your audience is.
 - Write down your rough argument about the issue as you would speak it to a friend or colleague.
 - Review for gaps in information.
 - Can you back up every statement you have made? If not, make note.
- 

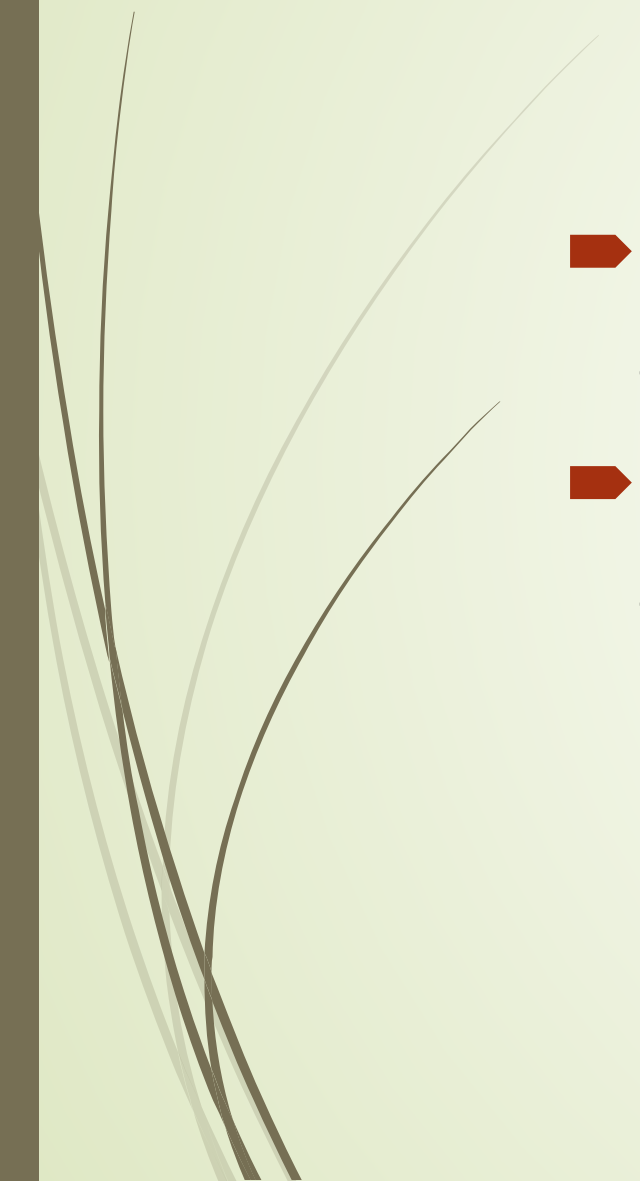


Step 3: RESEARCH

- Gather the information that you need to support your argument.
 - Look for highly credible, recent sources.
 - Think about possible counter-arguments and prepare points to address them.
- 



STEP 4: RE-WRITE

- Go back to the initial draft, fill in sources and reshape based on research.
 - Ensure clarity of thought with key argument(s) made towards the very beginning of the piece.
- 



Step 5: final review

➤ Checklist

- A clear narrative
- Concise language
- Logical flow of the argument(s)
- Word count between 650 – 700 words
- Persuasive




Step 6: pitching

- Determine which publication you (ideally) want your piece to run in.
- Prepare a brief email that describes your commentary (if you want to first test interest) and/or include the piece.
- Provide a deadline to when you want to hear back if you are aiming at a specific publication.
- Or, send to multiple publications and respond to the first one that accepts it. Let the others know.




Step 7: follow up

- Share widely on social media, tag organizations and individuals that would be particularly interested.
 - Thank the editor after the piece is published (reinforce the interest you've seen in the piece when thanking the editor).
- 



Your turn

- Brainstorm an idea in a group
 - Decide the angle/argument and audience
 - Work independently to craft a narrative
 - Use your smart phone for research
 - Draft the opinion editorial
 - Exchange with someone, provide feedback
 - Outline your main challenges
- 

QUESTIONS?

