

## Why Sociologists Should Write Op-Eds

### The basics

- An op-ed means opposing editorial. It is opinion, not news.
- An op-ed should offer an original take and perspective on an issue of the day not found in the mainstream press. Something no one else is saying at the moment. A new and original perspective on the matter.
- An op-ed generally has a word limit of 500–800 words max. However, some publications, such as *Time* magazine, for example, have some as short as 300 words, while other newspapers, such as Guyana's *Stabroek News* are between 800–1,500 words.
- An op-ed is not a letter to the editor, which is generally shorter (50–250 words) but can still be influential.
- An op-ed should make ONE strong argument.
- Read other op-eds to see and get a feel for the style: *UK Guardian*, *Trinidad Express*, *Jamaica Observer*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times* etc. Also *The Nation*, *New Internationalist*, *Red Pepper* (magazine), *Inside Higher Ed*, etc. Read other op-eds in the publications and websites you hope to publish in to see what styles are common.

### Op-eds are one very effective way to draw attention to an idea

- They are effective in forcing you to clarify your own thinking, argument, what you really want to say.
- Op-eds can have a life after publication: use them to spread the word about your work, as an organising tool, for teaching, to get others involved, for politicians (e.g., as a lobbying tool), or for anyone you're trying to reach, where it helps to communicate what your work is about very quickly.
- The above step is critical. As with your work generally, you can't assume it will be read. Make sure it will have a life of its own after publication.

At a recent session of the American Sociological Association meetings in 2019 the topic was what journalists can learn from sociologists

(<https://twitter.com/JessicaCalarco/status/1160884440706494464>).

The topic covered the importance of sociologists participating in public sociology.

According to Nicholas Lemann, a staff writer for the *New Yorker* and former Dean of the Columbia Journalism School and one of the speakers at the session, there is much that journalists can learn from sociologists. These include:

1. How to do literature reviews (understanding the contours of the debate – what is/isn't known and why).
2. Recognising how the world works in terms of patterns and structures (not just individual actors).
3. Recognising the value of anonymity (not using real names can avoid the assumption that the world is shaped by actors, not structures).
4. Data-driven story telling.

For Sarah Garland, an executive editor of the [Hechinger Report](#) – which is an in-depth journalism publication that uses research, data and stories from classrooms and campuses to show the public how education can be improved and why it matters – sociologists can help journalists by:

1. Building relationships with reporters (not just to promote your own work, but to reach out to local journalists about local issues).
2. Showing them how your research is done.
3. Helping them trust your data by acknowledging the limitations of your data.

In what follows we provide a quick-how-to-guide and a longer, more detailed how-to-guide in order to help you develop, write and publish your own op-eds.

### **Writing op-eds #1: a quick guide**

**Step 1** – Narrow in on the one sociological idea or piece of data you want to convey to a public audience. Daydream about it; speak it to yourself in your head.

**Step 2** – Next, drop down a rough outline, a working title and think of a ‘lede’. (A lede is the hook and opening for your op-ed. It is the introductory section of a news story that is intended to entice the reader to read the full story. A good lede is topical, sometimes rhetorical and always grabs a reader to want to know more.)

**Step 3** – Ensure you know the topic inside out. Do your research. Identify the newspaper or editorial space you are writing for. What is the word count? Who is the editor? What is the audience? Read a couple of previous op-eds from that publication to get a feel and idea of the writing space.

**Step 4** – Write your op-ed. Keep the information simple, basic and address just one issue. Draft it. Edit it. Draft it again. Read each word and make sure that every word is the correct word you want.

**Step 5** – Read the piece aloud to yourself. Could more words still be cut from it? The answer is always yes, until a final no.

**Step 6** – Sleep on it.

**Step 7** – Edit it one more time.

**Step 8** – Add your final title (sub editors may often change it so don’t overthink this).

**Step 9** – Possible extra step: get someone else to read it.

**Step 10** – Submit it.

### **Writing op-eds #2: a more detailed how-to guide**

#### **The writing**

- Start with your research, your area of expertise.
- Clear, strong language. Short, strong sentences.
- Do not use academic or bureaucratic jargon.
- Make your paragraphs short and punchy.

- Vary the cadence of your sentences.
- Humour often helps.
- Read your op-ed over and over to catch spelling, grammatical and punctuation errors. Missing small errors is the quickest way to have your op-ed rejected – don't give them a reason to reject it.
- Your personal experiences and first-person narratives from research or everyday life can be useful because they articulate an original perspective and establish your authority and expertise.

### **News hook**

- Critical: you have to grab people's (and initially an editor's) attention immediately. In the first sentence and paragraph make sure your issue is relevant to the news of the moment
- Lede should offer a powerful, clear, succinct opening.
- Humour or rhetorical questions are also a great way to begin.
- You can write the body of an op-ed and wait for a news hook to finish and submit.
- Anniversaries, holidays, and significant historical dates make easy news hooks.

### **The body**

- Context and background: enough to understand your argument but not too detailed/academic to lose the reader; word limit helps with this, forcing you to decide which critical information to include.
- Make your argument point by point.
- Usually end with the main point, argument, call to action or a question to be answered by the reader. Articulate the argument powerfully and clearly, but avoid hyperbole.
- Don't worry about coming up with a perfect title. The editorial team will usually choose one. Just be sure to include one that identifies your topic to the editor straight away.

### **Format**

- Name, title, institution, contact details (email and phone), date and all-in word count.
- Single space is best; one line space between paragraph breaks.
- Put '--end--' two lines after the last sentence.
- Biography: 2 sentences (maximum).

### **Audience and submissions**

- Know the politics of the publication.
- Know the immediate audience – editors and staff.
- Politics: who you are matters, too. Establish your authority on the matter. Speak to your research.
- Use any connections you have and cultivate them with editors, staff, etc.
- Be strategic about submissions: who are likely to be interested and where. If a paper has covered a topic in the past, it may do so again; however, if covered recently, it may be too soon.
- One submission at a time.
- In 3–5 days follow up, and then move on.
- Keep submitting until published. There are so many outlets in print, online, blogging, etc., so don't give up!

- When published, make sure people read it by sending out email blasts, blogs, copies, Facebook posts, tweets, etc.

### **Practice**

- Op-ed writing is a skill that takes doing and doing and doing.
- See the long term; build from one to the next in terms of where you get published.
- Don't be discouraged if you don't get published right away.

### **Dissemination and impact strategy**

- Be strategic: Don't assume people will come to you or that your work will automatically have an impact. It won't. You have to sell it to others.
- Plan ahead of time precisely as to how you ensure your work will gain exposure and have an impact in the world.
- Distribute copies of your work to your interlocutors in the field, in an accessible format. This may include translating, summarising or dissemination in other media (flyers, memos, YouTube videos, etc.) to successfully communicate ideas in your fieldwork setting.