

How to Write an Op-Ed

with Najma Sambul

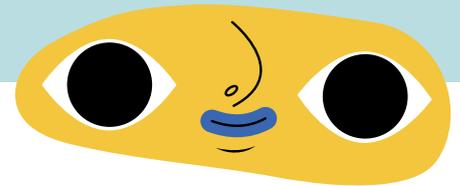
There's no denying we've entered into a highly charged news environment.

We can probably blame social media for that (comments section, I'm looking at you). In saying that, social media has given people, particularly those from historically marginalised communities, a new found voice and a way to push back against the failings of mainstream media.

However, for those wanting to articulate their opinions beyond social media and into a structured piece of writing, the op-ed is still a valuable way to do that.

And with news organisations keen to publish diverse voices from different communities, it is worthwhile to consider pitching and writing an op-ed.

So, how do you do that?



What is an op-ed?

Firstly, to write an op-ed, you have to know what it is.

'Op-ed' means opposite the editorial, because in a newspaper that's where it was traditionally placed. Nowadays, op-eds are not just in print but also online, and the term is used to refer generally to an opinion article.

Unlike other articles, an op-ed needs to have an opinion, that's its key signifier.

A good example of recent op-ed was [Greens Senator Lidia Thorpes' piece for The Age on the Indigenous Voice to Parliament](#) and another great example is from New York Time's opinion columnist [Charles M. Blow's piece](#) about the Black Lives Matter movement.

Important things to consider before writing and pitching an op-ed

- Which news organisation do I want to get published in?
- Is my piece best suited to their audience?
- What kind of tone do I write in?

All of these questions should be considered well before pitching to any editor of a news organisation. There is nothing worse than writing something that has either been recently published by a news organisation or doesn't suit their tone/ style.

So, do your research!

What do I write about?

There are a few ways to come up with an idea for an op-ed. It can be about any topic you want, or something you feel you need to say.

When coming up with an idea it's helpful to do the following:

1. Google it

American filmmaker Jim Jarmusch famously proclaimed, "Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination."

While you should never plagiarize (that's a separate thing), reading what's already been said in an area can give you a fresh idea. For example, if you're thinking of writing on a broader topic like gender pay gap or racial justice, you'll find a lot of great material online.

2. Read/ listen/ watch the news!

There is no better way to come up with an op-ed idea than by being an avid consumer of news. It gives you the contextual knowledge and understanding of a topic, especially if you've been following a particular story. The great thing about consuming news is that you develop more opinions.

3. Speak to people

I think this is what a lot of people forget to do these days. Have a conversation with someone about a particular topic, maybe it's your grandmother, a friend, or a colleague. It doesn't have to be a heated debate, but maybe you're really interested to know what your grandmother thinks about climate change or public housing, it can get your creative juices flowing.

Ultimately, an idea for an op-ed can come from anywhere. It's important that you have an opinion on the topic and you believe in it enough to put your name to it.

How do I write it?

The best op-eds are often plain in language (no cliches), clear, and concise. The author will have a clear opinion on a topic and argue it well. At the end the piece should circle back to the main contention and leave the reader feeling satisfied.

It's similar to high school essays teachers make students write. For anyone currently going through that, stick with it! It really is useful.

There are many ways to begin an op-ed. You can start with an anecdote, especially if the piece is more personal to you, or you can begin by simply stating your opinion off the bat, or you can begin by referencing the inspiration for the piece whether that's a news story or a conversation.

Overcoming the first sentence hurdle is often the hardest, and can make writer's feel defeated before they've even begun (including myself). But, who says you have to write the first sentence first?

Writing doesn't have to be formulaic, although it helps, you can begin your piece on the most pressing thought and then circle back to tackle the opening.

As Hemingway put it, "All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know."

Okay, I've finished the first draft, what do I do?

Congratulations, you've just completed the toughest step. Now, you must edit!

British writer [Zadie Smith addressed New York University's students in 2011](#), and told them that she had to learn control in her writing through "editing severely" and "getting rid of that principle of perfection."

It's important to take time away from your first draft and look at it with fresh eyes, preferably the next day. You'll be able to criticise your work and get it in shape before you send it off to an editor.

How do I get my op-ed published?

There are two options, either you write your op-ed before it gets commissioned by an editor or you pitch an idea first. As we've just gone through how to write one, for the sake of this article I'll assume you have written the piece already.

Every news organisation should have a tab that directs you to their opinion editor, there you will find their name and contact details.

The best way to pitch is by emailing the opinion editor by introducing yourself and letting them know about your idea.

For example this is one I did for MTV Australia:

Hi (editor's name),

I hope you are well. My name is Najma Sambul and I'm a freelance writer and journalist.

Please see my pitch below:

The Hip-Hop industry and fans across the world are mourning Rapper and MC DMX who passed away on Friday at 50 years old. A statement released by the New York born rapper's family broke the news of his passing. Def Jam Records also released a statement (www.defjam.com/statement-from-def-jam-recordings-on-the-passing-of-dmx/#/_) stating his "Legend will live on forever"—but will it?

My angle is: Hip-hop radio stations barely play rap legends and the culture is so heavily focused by the young and new talent, so when we say a hip-hop legend will live on forever this is hypocrisy.

As a life-long fan of DMX I want to see his music played on radio stations as much as we see Rock legends played. Is that so much to ask? With corporations controlling mainstream hip-hop culture (i.e white men) what chance do legends like DMX stand to "live on forever".

If you like this pitch, I can turn this around in two days.

Best,

Najma

Writing an op-ed may not always work out, or a pitch may not be accepted, however it is a great way to articulate your own opinion. With anything it takes a lot of practice, and a lot of self-editing to getting it write.

Najma Sambul

