



Oped Tips

The task of writing a 600- to 800-word oped can appear daunting at first. Essentially, though, it's just a long letter to the editor in which you're given extra space to back up the message you want to get across. Here are a few tips – guidelines, if you will – to get you going:

Be topical. As with letters to the editor, an oped must relate to something that's being reported in the news. We often talk about letter-to-the-editor opportunities. The same is true for opeds. It's not hard to find an opening – extreme weather disasters, major reports, news on Canada's limited action on climate change, clean energy development, and so on.

What's the local angle? Your local newspaper doesn't care about the fate of polar bears in the arctic, but if you can relate climate change to what's happening in your province and community, editors are more likely to accept your piece.

Be compelling, right from the start. You have one, maybe two sentences to grab the reader's attention. Say something provocative, engaging and informative at the very beginning. Something that makes the reader say, "Okay, you have my attention. Tell me more." Don't pussyfoot around or back into things with historical background. The reader needs to immediately know what your point is, or they'll move on to the next article.

Be focused. Don't try to say too much. It's tempting, given 700 words, to say everything you ever wanted to say about climate change and carbon taxes. But by trying to make too many points, you end up saying nothing because the reader doesn't know what to really take away from your piece. Your message gets diffused. Again, think letter to the editor, and focus on just getting one or two points across. The difference here is that you can go deeper with the points you are making, more info to back them up. Yes, there are many angles to this topic. Save some of them for your next piece.

Answer the questions. Each statement you make raises a question in the mind of the reader. A good writer will anticipate those questions and answer them. Often, those answers will raise more questions that you should answer. Anticipating and answering the questions will create a natural and logical flow to your piece. A good technique is to actually pose a question and then answer it: How can we tax carbon without it being an economic burden on Canadian families?

What's the narrative? Everyone likes a good story. What's the story you're trying to tell with your piece? Facts and numbers are important to back up the points you wish to make, but if all you do is tick off a list of facts, the reader will shut down. Your facts

must be carefully weaved into the context of a larger narrative, spoon-fed to the reader, as it were.

Create an outline. Once you've decided what you're going to write about, come up with an outline – 6 or 7 items – that takes you from your opening to your conclusions. When you get stuck, go back to your outline and see what's next. Your outline also becomes the “shopping list” for the research you'll need to do for your piece.

Do the research before you start. Once you've figured out your topic, read as many articles about it as you can until the information is coming out of your pores. This will make the writing process much easier. The words will spill out of your head. Nothing stymies the writing process like having to stop and look for information to back up your case.

Tools of the writer's craft. The best communicators make good use of literary devices – repetition, irony, simile, metaphor and extended metaphor. Climate blogger Joe Romm has an excellent book about this – *Language Intelligence: Lessons on persuasion from Jesus, Shakespeare, Lincoln and Lady Gaga*. The CCL oped – “Last Call at Club Fossil Fuel” – provides an example of the extended metaphor.

Get personal. Though it's not the approach you would use very often, writing in the first person can make for a compelling piece, provided your story has a strong bearing on the topic you're presenting. After the conference, for example, your experience in DC will provide good material for a “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” type of story.

In conclusion... Nothing takes the air out of an oped like a weak finish. Two important things you want to do in your conclusion – 1) repeat the main point of your oped and 2) circle back what you were talking about at the beginning. If you have a clever turn of phrase you've been waiting to pull out, this would be the place to do it.

Can you write headline? The true test of the quality of an oped is the ease with which you can write a headline for it. If you can't sum up what you're trying to say in eight words, you might consider a rewrite. When you submit your oped, include the suggested headline. More often than not, they'll use it. This reduces the risk of a bad headline being written. The headline is the first entry point to your piece, and you don't want a botched introduction.

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