

Editorial Writing Tips

Focus tightly on one issue or idea — in your first paragraph: Be brief. Be satisfied with making a single point clearly and persuasively. If you cannot explain your message in a sentence or two, you're trying to cover too much. The "lead" is the most important sentence you'll write because you have no more than 5 seconds to hook a busy reader, just get to the point and convince the reader that it's worth their valuable time to continue.

Use short sentences and short paragraphs with no jargon: Write in simple declarative sentences. If a technical detail is not essential to your argument, don't use it. Simple language doesn't mean simple thinking; it means you are being considerate of readers who lack your expertise. Educate your reader without being preachy. Avoid using the words "impact" or "impacted", instead use: effect on; influence or alter.

Tell readers why they should care: Put yourself in the place of the busy person looking at your op-ed piece. At the end of every few paragraphs, ask yourself: "So what? Who cares?" Explain why this is important. Appeal to their self-interest — it will lower their taxes or create jobs, etc. THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING YOU CAN DO TO MAKE THIS A GOOD OP-ED ARTICLE.

Tell me a story: Showing is better than discussing because we humans are hardwired to remember stories better than facts. Look for examples that will bring your argument to life. For example, I remember the Air Force's overpriced toilet seats that became a symbol of unchecked federal spending, but I don't remember the total Pentagon budget for that year.

Use the active voice: Don't write: "It is hoped that, or, One would hope that the government will . . ." Instead, say "I hope the government will . . ." Active voice is nearly always better than passive voice. It's easier to read, and it leaves no doubt about who is doing the hoping, recommending or other action. Have a clear editorial viewpoint - come down hard on one side of the issue. Don't equivocate

Relax, have fun: Be personal and conversational; it can help you make your point. No one likes a stuffed shirt. You'll improve your chances of this running if you lighten up, have some fun and entertain the reader a bit.

Make the ending strong: It's important to summarize your argument in a strong final paragraph. That's because many casual readers scan the headline, skim the opening column and then read only the final paragraph and byline. One trick many columnists use is to conclude with a phrase or thought that they used in the opening, thereby closing the circle.