

Tips for Writing an Opinion Editorial (Op-Ed) and Letter to the Editor

Elected officials pay attention to the opinion editorials (op-eds) and letters to the editor printed in their hometown newspapers. So writing an op-ed or letter to the editor for your local newspaper is a great way to push the Pickens Plan. Following is an overview of these two options so you can choose an approach that best fits you.

Op-Eds

The term “op-ed” is derived from the fact that these essays typically appear in the section of a newspaper reserved for Opinion pieces (op) and Editorials (ed). Opinion pieces are generally (but not always) written by outsiders, that is, people not employed by the newspaper. These can be local experts in a subject area, a local leader – civic or political, or a “syndicated columnist”. These are the personal opinion of the writer.

Depending on the editorial guidelines of your local newspaper, as a District Leader for the Pickens Plan you may be in a position to pitch an op-ed piece.

Op-ed pieces are generally 500-750 words long. This is significantly longer than a typical letter to the editor which may be as short as 50 words and may run up to 200 words. If you can say all you need to say in 500 words that’s fine. Stop. If you need a few more words to make your case, that’s fine, too.

Stick to one subject.

You may want to get a number of issues off your chest, but you should pick the one which is weighing the most and write about that. Save the other three or five or seven items for other essays.

State your position at the beginning of the article.

One of the basic mistakes in opinion piece writing is to save the point of the piece for the end; for a “big finish.” This is called “burying the lead” and, to a professional editor, is a sure sign that the writer is new at this.

Start with a simple declaration of your position. For example, this might be a good lead for an op-ed on the Pickens Plan:

“The Pickens Plan is the only proposal on the table which will lower our dependence on foreign oil by up to 50 percent over the next ten years.”

After you’ve stated your thesis, you can present the supporting information:

- 22% of electrical power produced in the U.S. comes from natural gas.
- The Department of Energy did a study showing 20% of our electrical power needs could be generated from wind energy in the “wind corridor” stretching from northern Texas to the Canadian border.

- That would free up natural gas to be used instead of diesel to power over-the-road trucks.
- 70% of our imported oil is used as a transportation fuel.
- 30% of all that is used as diesel fuel for heavy trucks.
- Current battery technology does not provide enough power to move an 18-wheeler.
- By replacing existing heavy trucks burning imported diesel with trucks running on domestic natural gas, we can immediately begin reversing our dependence on foreign oil.

It is better to have short, declarative sentences than long convoluted ones. If you look at what you've written and you see a lot of commas, you can probably exchange some of them for periods and break a complex sentence up into several simple ones.

It is also better to have shorter paragraphs than very long ones. It is easier for readers if their eye doesn't have to decode long sections of small type. If the editor wants to combine some of the paragraphs, he or she will do that.

Take a look at the op-ed pieces which are being published in your local paper and look for a "news hole." If your local paper is on a mission to keep people in their homes, despite having fallen behind on their mortgage payments, the editors may not be terribly interested in an "energy" op-ed.

If, however, gasoline prices spike, or there are articles about heating oil or natural gas prices for homes during winter's grip, that might be a very good time to submit an op-ed on America's energy problems.

You might also look at foreign news. If there are articles about a shortage of natural gas or diesel fuel in Europe, that might trigger an editor's thinking on having a piece on U.S. energy issues printed in the paper.

Finally, don't be discouraged if your first attempt (or second, or third) is not accepted. The most precious commodity an editor has is space. He or she has only a set amount of space in any day's edition and getting your piece published may have nothing to do with your writing ability and have everything to do with that day's "news budget."

Even professional writers are lucky to have their columns accepted for publication 50 percent of the time. In any event, don't be a pen pal, but keep trying to find the proper balance of subject matter and space requirements.

When you *do* get published you will be very pleasantly surprised at the number of people who will come up and tell you they liked what you wrote.

Talking points and further information about the Pickens Plan are provided at the [Pickens Plan Resource Center](http://www.pickensplan.com/resources) (<http://www.pickensplan.com/resources>). Your Regional Leader can also help you develop your piece and give you ideas for the best way to submit it to your local newspaper.

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the Editor are exactly that – a letter you write to the Editor of the newspaper stating your opinion on an issue, event, etc.

If you are not comfortable writing a longer essay-style op-ed piece, then a letter to the editor might be a better option for you.

You are probably familiar with the letters to the editor in your local newspaper. If you've never submitted one yourself, you probably know of other people in your community who have. The topics of letters to the editor printed on any given day can vary significantly, but as with op-eds, letters to the editor related to current news and events are more likely to be printed.

Typical letters to the editor may be as short as 50 words and may run up to 200 words. Before you sit down to write your letter, you should check the editorial guidelines of your local newspaper. If you submit a letter that is too long and would require the editor to modify it significantly, then your chances of getting the letter printed are much lower. As with op-eds, you should pick only one topic, keep the letter short and to the point, and don't veer off topic.

Most importantly, what you write should come from you and be in your voice – if you are able to articulate how you feel about the issue in a compelling way, your letter has a better chance of being printed.

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