



HOW TO WRITE AN OP-ED

Ulrich Boser

The Learning Agency

Winter, 2019

There's a formula that we call the "ABCs" that can be used to write compelling op-eds, columns, or blogs. The same formula can also be used to write almost any document that offers up an argument or gives advice. This is a "news flash lede," a comment which will make sense in a moment.

This formula for writing op-eds is based on our experience, and our op-eds that appeared in the [New York Times](#), the [Wall Street Journal](#), and the [Washington Post](#). I first came across a version of this formula while I was at *US News and World Report*. It was called "FLUCK," and we have tweaked it a bit since then.

This is probably obvious, but this ABC formula is meant to guide writers rather than restrict them. In other words, these are recommendations, not a rigid set of instructions.

Better yet, think of the formula as a flexible template for making an effective argument in print—one that you personalize with your specific style, topic and intended audience in mind.

This guide is divided into three parts

Part I: Introduction. In this section, we give a brief overview of the approach and discuss the importance of writing an opinion.

Part II: The ABCs: Here we cover the important steps in writing for your audience: Attention, Billboard and Context

PART III: The ABCs in Example: In this section, we give you different examples of how the ABC's in action and how to effectively use them.

PART IV: Pitching: Here we will go over how to effectively pitch ideas and submit ideas to an editor for publication.

PART V: Final tips and FAQs: Here we go over a few more key things to do and answer the most commonly asked questions.

Part I. Op-eds are one of the most powerful tools in communications today. They can make a career. They can break a career.

But there's often lots of mystery around editorials and op-eds. I mean: What does op-ed even stand for?

Well, let's start with editorials. Editorials are columns written by a member of a publication's board or editors, and they are meant to represent the view of the publication. While reporting has the main purpose of informing the public, editorials can serve a large number of purposes. But typically editorials aim to persuade an audience on a controversial issue.

Op-eds, on the other hand, are "opposite the editorial" page columns. They began as a way for an author to present an opinion that opposed the one on the editorial board. Note that an op-ed is different than a letter to the editor, which is when someone writes a note to complain about an article, and that note is published. Think of a letter to the editor as an old, more staid form of the comments section of an article.

The New York Times produced the first modern op-ed in 1970, and over time, op-eds became a way for people to simply express their opinions in the media. They tend to be written by experts, observers, or someone who is passionate about a topic, and as media, in general, becomes more partisan, op-ed have become more and more common.

How to start. The first step for writing an op-ed is to be sure to: Make. An. Argument.

Many op-eds fail because they just summarize key details. But, wrong or right, op-eds need to advance a strong contention. It needs to assert something, and the first step is to write down your argument.

Here are some examples:

- I want to write an op-ed on the plague that are drinks that overflow with ice cubes. This op-ed would argue that restaurants serve drinks with too many ice cubes.
- Superman is clearly better than Batman. In this op-ed, I would convince readers why Superman is a better superhero than Batman.
- My op-ed is on lowering the voting age in America. An op-ed on this topic would list reasons why Congress should pass a law to allow those who are 14 years old like me to be able to vote in elections.

How to write. So you have yourself an argument. It's now time to write the op-ed. When it comes to writing, this guide assumes a decent command of the English language; we're not going to cover the basics of nouns and verbs. However, keep in mind a few things:

- **Blogs, op-eds, and columns are short.** Less than 1,000 words. Usually between 500 and 700 words. Many blogs are just a few hundred words, basically, a few graphs and a pull quote often does the job.
- **Simplicity, logic, and clarity are your best friends** when it comes to writing op-eds and blogs. In other words, write like a middle schooler. Use short sentences and clear words. Paragraphs should be less than four sentences. Please take a look at [Strunk and White](#) for more information. I used to work with John Podesta, who has written many great op-eds, and he was rumored to have given his staff a copy of [Strunk and White](#) on their first day of employment.
- **Love yourself topic sentences.** The first sentence of each paragraph needs to be strong, and your topic sentences should give an overall idea of what's to follow. In other words, a reader should be able to grasp what your article's argument by reading the first sentence of each paragraph.

How to make an argument. This guide is not for reporters or news writers. That's journalism. This guide is for people who make arguments. So keep in mind the following:

- **Evidence.** This might be obvious But you need evidence to support your argument. This means data in the form of published studies, government statistics, anything that offers cold facts. Stories are good

and can support your argument. But try and go beyond a good anecdote.

- **Tone.** Check out the bloggers and columnists that are in the publications that you're aiming for, and try to emulate them when it comes to their argumentative tone. Is their tone critical? Humorous? Breezy? Your tone largely hinges on what type of outlet you are writing for, which brings us to...
- **Audience.** Almost everything in your article — from what type of language you use to your tone — depends on your audience. A piece for a children's magazine is going to read differently than, say, an op-ed in the *Washington Post*. The best way to familiarize yourself with your audience is to read pieces that have already been published in the outlet you are writing for or hoping to write for. Take note of how the author presents her argument, and then adjust yours accordingly.

Sidebar: Advice vs Argument. Offering advice in the form of a how-to article — like what you're reading right now — is different than putting forth an argument in an actual op-ed piece.

That said, advice pieces, like this [one](#) by Lifehacker or this [one](#) by Hubspot, follow much of the same ABC formula. For instance, advice pieces will still often begin with an attention-grabbing opener and contextualize their subject matter.

However, instead of trying to make an argument in the body of the article, the advice pieces will typically list five to ten ways of “how to do” something. For example, “How to cook chicken quesadillas” or “How to ask someone out on a date.”

The primary purpose of an advice piece is to inform rather than to convince. In other words, advice pieces describe what you *could* do, while op-ed pieces show us what we *should* do.

PART 1: Dissecting the ABC approach

Formula. There are six steps that make up the ABC method, and yes, that

means it should really be called the ABCEDF method. Either way, here are the steps:

- **Attention** (sometimes called the lede): Here's your chance to grab the reader's attention. The opening of an opinion piece should bring the reader into the article quickly. This is also sometimes referred to as the flash or the lede, and there are two types of flash introductions. They are:

Option 1. Narrative flash. A narrative flash is a story that brings readers into the article. It should be some sort of narrative hook that grabs attention and entices the reader to delve further into the piece. A brief and descriptive anecdote often works well as a narrative flash. It simultaneously catches the reader's attention and hints at the weightier argument and evidence yet to come.

When I first started writing for *US News*, I wrote a flash lede to introduce an article about paddling school children. Here's the text:

Ben Line didn't think the assistant principal had the strength or the gumption. But he was wrong. The 13-year-old alleges that the educator hit him twice with a paddle in January, so hard it left scarlet lines across his buttocks. Ben's crime? He says he talked back to a teacher in class, calling a math problem "dumb."

Option 2. News flash. Some pieces — especially those tied to the news — can have a lede without a narrative start. Other pieces, including many op-eds, are simply too short, to begin with a narrative flash. In either of these instances, using the news flash as your lede is likely your best bet.

If I was writing a news flash lede for the padding piece, I might start with something as simple as *Congress again is considering legislation to outlaw paddling.*

- **Billboard** (also often called the nut graph): The billboard portion of the lede should do two things:
 - First, the "billboard" section should *make an argument that elevates the stakes and begins to introduce general evidence and context for the argument.* So start to

introduce some general evidence to support your argument in the nut portion of the lede.

- Second, the billboard should *begin to lay the framework of the piece and flush out important details*—with important story components like Who, What, When, Where, How, Why, etc. A good billboard graph often ends with a quote or call to action. Think of it like this: if someone reads only your “billboard” section, she should be able to grasp your argument and the basic details.

If you use a narrative flash lede, then the nut paragraph often starts with something like: *They are not alone*. So in the padding article, for instance, the nut might have been: *“Ben is not alone. In fact, 160,000 students are subject to corporal punishment in U.S. schools each year, according to a 2016 social policy report.”*

For an example of a nut graph for a longer piece on say, sibling-on-sibling rivalry, consider the following:

The Smith sisters exemplify a disturbing trend. Research indicates that violence between siblings—defined as the physical, emotional or sexual abuse of one sibling by another, and ranging from mild to highly violent—is likely more common than child abuse by parents. In fact, a new report from the University of Michigan Health System indicates the most violent members of American families are indeed the children. Data suggests that three out of 100 children are considered dangerously violent toward a brother or sister, and nine-year-old Kayla Smith is one of those victims: “My sister used to get mad and hit me every once in a while, but now it happens at least twice a week. She just goes crazy sometimes. She’s broken my nose, kicked out two teeth and dislocated my shoulder.”

- **Context** (often called the history graph): Step back and provide your reader with more background, context and ultimately, support for the overall point of your piece. Think of this as the paragraph that begins to untangle a long history or a growing trend.

The unpack section often starts with a sentence like *There's a long history to this idea*. So, for instance, the paddling story might have had a topic sentence for the unpack graph that goes: *There's a long history to paddling*.

For another example, here's a history graph from a recent op-ed by John Podesta that ran in the [Washington Post](#):

"To give some context: On Oct. 7, 2016, WikiLeaks began leaking emails from my personal inbox that had been hacked by Russian intelligence operatives. A few days earlier, Stone — a longtime Republican operative and close confidant of then-candidate Donald Trump — had mysteriously predicted that the organization would reveal damaging information about the Clinton campaign. And weeks before that, he'd even tweeted: 'Trust me, it will soon [be] Podesta's time in the barrel.'"

If you're writing an advice piece, then similar advice applies. A how-to guide for Photoshop, for example, might include recent changes to the program and information on the many ways that Photoshop can be used to edit pictures.

- **Demonstrate:** In this section, you must offer specific details to support your argument. If writing an op-ed, this section can be three or four paragraphs long. If writing a column, this section can be six or ten paragraphs long. Either way, the section should outline the most compelling evidence to support your thesis.

For my paddling article, for instance, I offered this argument paragraph.

The problem with corporal punishment, Straus stresses, is that it has lasting effects that include increased aggression and social difficulties. Specifically, Straus studied more than 800 mothers over a period from 1988 to 1992 and found that children who were spanked were more rebellious after four years, even after controlling for their initial behaviors. Groups that advocate for children, like the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Education Association, oppose the practice in schools for those reasons.

While the narrative can be vital when capturing a reader's attention, it's equally important to offer hard facts in the evidence section. When demonstrating the details of your argument, be sure to present accurate facts from reputable sources. Studies published in established journals are a good source of evidence, for instance, but blogs with unverified claims are not.

Also, when providing supporting details, you should think about using what the Ancient Greeks called ethos, pathos, and logos. To explain, ethos refers to appeals based on your own credibility, that you're someone worth listening too. For example, if you are arguing why steroids should be banned in baseball, you might talk about how you once used steroids and how their terrible impact on your health.

Pathos refers to using evidence that plays to the emotions. For example, if you are trying to show why people should evacuate during hurricanes, you might describe a family who lost their seven-year-old child during a hurricane.

Logos refers to logical statements, typically based off facts and statistics. For example, if you are trying to convince the audience why they should join the military when they are young, provide statistics of their income when they retire and the benefits they receive while in the military.

- **Equivocate:** You should strengthen your argument by including at least one graph that briefly describes—and then discounts—the strongest counter-argument to your point. This is often called the “to be sure” paragraph, and it hedges your bets about the clarity of your piece with phrases such as “to be sure” or “in other words.”

Here's an [example](#) from a recent op-ed in Bloomberg.

Of course, that doesn't mean that Hispanics simply change while other Americans stay the same. In his 2017 book "The Other Side of Assimilation: How Immigrants Are Changing American Life," Jimenez recounts how more established American groups change their culture and broaden their horizons based on their personal relationships with more recently arrived immigrant groups. Assimilation isn't slavish

conformity to white norms, but a two-way process where the U.S. is changed by each new group that arrives.

- **Forward:** This is where you wrap up your piece. It carries greater impact, though, if you can write an ending that has some oomph to it and really looks forward. So try to provide some parting thoughts and, when appropriate to the topic, draw your readers to look toward the future. If you began with a narrative flash lede, it's optimal whenever possible to find a way to tie back into that introductory story. It allows you to simultaneously finalize the premise of your argument and neatly conclude your article.

In an [op-ed](#) about gun violence that ran last year, minister Jeff Blattner looks toward the future and seamlessly ties the end of his piece back to his lede with this simple, but effective kicker:

If we don't commit ourselves to solve them together—to seeing one another as part of a bigger “us”—we may reap a whirlwind of ever-widening division. Let Pittsburgh, in its grief, show us the way.

PART 2:

Now that we have gone over the basic ABC formula, let's examine a recent blog item and identify the six ABC steps.

Written by E.A. Crunden, the piece appeared in *ThinkProgress* and is titled, [“Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke is embroiled in more than one scandal.”](#)

Attention: *“A controversial contract benefiting a small company based in his hometown is only the latest possible corruption scandal linked to Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke...”*

This opening sentence introduces the most recent news on Zinke while also signaling that other scandals might be discussed in the article.

Billboard: *“On Monday, nonprofit watchdog group the Campaign Legal Center (CLC) accused Zinke's dormant congressional campaign of*

dodging rules prohibiting individuals from converting political donations into individual revenue.”

The second paragraph adds more information about Zinke’s alleged missteps.

Context: *“Zinke’s other ethical close-calls, as the CLC noted, are plentiful”* ”

This provides some background to the main argument and it lets the reader know that Zinke has a long history of questionable ethics, which the author expands upon in the following paragraphs.

Demonstrate: *“As a Montana congressman, Zinke took thousands of dollars in campaign contributions from oil and gas companies, many of whom drill on the same public lands he now oversees...”*

Here the author gives specific evidence of Zinke’s actions that some believe to be unethical. This fortifies the argument. The following few paragraphs continue in this vein.

Equivocate: *“I had absolutely nothing to do with Whitefish Energy receiving a contract in Puerto Rico,” the interior secretary wrote in a statement on Friday.”*

In this case, the equivocation appears in the form of a counterargument. The writer goes on to dismiss it by presenting additional clarifying evidence to support his point.

Forward: *“Monday’s complaint comes amid a Special Counsel investigation into Zinke’s spending habits, as well as a separate investigation opened by Interior Department’s inspector general. Audits into Puerto Rico’s canceled contract with Whitefish Energy Holdings are also ongoing.”*

These final two sentences “zoom out” from the specifics of the article, showing that the main news item (i.e., Zinke’s poor ethics) will continue to be relevant in the future. These forward-looking sentences also circle

back neatly to the point of the flash news lede by reiterating “Monday’s complaint” is yet another in a growing list against Zinke.

PART 4. Submission

Before you can convince a reader that what you’re writing about is important, you must convince an editor.

When it comes to op-eds, most outlets want to review a finished article. In other words, you write the op-ed and then shop it around to different editors. In some cases, the outlet might want a pitch — or brief summary— of the op-ed before you write it.

Either way, you’ll need a short summary, even just a few sentences that describe your argument. Here is an example of the pitch that I wrote that landed me on the front page of the *Washington Post’s* Outlook section. Note that this pitch is long, but I was aiming for a more feature-like op-ed.

I wanted to pitch a first-person piece looking at Neurocore, the questionable brain-training program that's funded by Betsy DeVos.

DeVos just got confirmed as Secretary of Education, and for years, she's been one of the major investors in Neurocore. Located in Michigan and Florida, the company makes some outlandish promises about brain-based training. The firm has argued, for instance, that their neuro-feedback programs have the ability to increase a person's IQ by up to 12 points.

I was going to take Neurocore's diagnostic program to get a better sense of the company's claims. As part of the story, I was also going to discuss the research on neuro-feedback, which is pretty weak. Insurance companies are also skeptical, and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan recently refused to reimburse for Neurocore's treatments. I'd also discuss some of my own research in this area and talk about some of the dangers of spreading myths about learning.

There's been some recent coverage of Neurocore. But the articles have typically focused on the conflict of interest posed by the company since DeVos herself has refused to disinvest. What's more, no one appears to have written

a first-person piece describing the experience of attending one of their brain training diagnostic sessions.

A few bits of advice:

- **Newsy** Whenever possible, build off the news. A good way to drum up interest in your piece is to connect it to current events. People naturally are interested in reading op-eds that are linked to recent news pieces — so, an op-ed on Electoral College reform will be more relevant around election season, for instance.

It's often effective to pitch your piece following a major news event. Even better if you can pitch your op-ed in advance; for example, a piece on voter suppression in the United States might be pitched in advance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Here's an [article](#) out of McGill University that has some advice on this idea.

- **Tailor.** Again, in this step of the process, it's worth considering the audience of the publication.

For example, if you're writing in the business section of a newspaper, you'll want to frame the article around business. If you are writing for a sports magazine, you'll want to write about topics like "Who is the greatest golfer of all-time, Tiger Woods or Jack Nicklaus?"

Also, websites sometimes have information on pitching their editors. Be sure to follow whatever specific advice they give — this will improve your chances of catching an editor's eye.

PART 5. FAQs

I have lots to say. Can I write a 3,000-word op-ed?

Not really. Most blogs, op-eds, and columns are short, less traction. What's more, your idea is more likely to gain traction if it's clear and simple. Take the Bible. It can be broken down to a simple idea: Love one another as you love yourself. Or take the Bill of Rights. It can be shortened to: Individuals have protections.

I want to tell a story. Can I do that?

Maybe. If you do, keep it short and reference the story at the top and maybe again the bottom. But again, the key about an op-ed is that it makes an argument.

What should do before I hit submit?

We could suggest two things:

1. Make sure you cite all your sources. Avoid plagiarism of any kind. If you're in doubt, provide a citation via a link or include endnotes citing your sources.
2. Check your facts. *The New York Times* op-ed columnist Bret Stephens says it this way: "Sweat the small stuff. Read over each sentence—read it aloud—and ask yourself: Is this true? Can I defend every single word of it? Did I get the facts, quotes, dates, and spellings exactly right? Yes, sometimes those spellings are hard: the president of Turkmenistan is Gurbanguly Malikgulyevich Berdymukhammedov. But, believe me, nothing's worse than having to run a correction." For more guidance, see Stephen's [list of tips for aspiring op-ed writers](#).
3. Read it out loud. Before I submit something, I'll read it out loud. It helps me catch typos and other errors. For more on talking out loud as a tool, see this [article](#) that I pulled together some time ago.

What's the difference between a blog and an op-ed?

A blog can be about anything such as "What I had for lunch today" or "Why I love Disney World." They're typically articles that run on an organization's website. An op-ed typically revolves around something in the news and is meant to be persuasive. It typically runs in a news outlet of some kind.

What if no one takes my op-ed?

Be patient. You might need to offer your op-ed to multiple outlets before someone decides to publish it, and you can always tweak the op-ed to make it more news-y, tying the article to something that happened in the news that day or week.

Also, look for ways to improve the op-ed. You might, for instance, focus on changing the “attention” section to make it more creative and interesting or try and improve the context section.

What is the best way to start writing an op-ed?

Before writing, make sure you do your research and create an outline. I will often write out my topic sentences and think about my evidence, and make sure that I’m really making a strong, evidence-based argument. Then I’ll focus on a creative way to open my op-ed.

Don’t worry if you get writer’s block while writing the attention step. You can always come back and make it more interesting. Really, the most important step is writing out your argument and finding the evidence.

Should I hyperlink?

Yes, include hyperlinks in your articles to provide your readers with easy access to additional information.

I want to know more?

Here are the links for two very different resources from two very different organizations, [Duke University](#) and the [American Association for Cancer Research](#). Both groups provide good pointers for writing op-ed pieces.