



WRITING CENTER QUICK REFERENCE OPINION COLUMNS AND EDITORIALS

How to Write an Effective Op-Ed

Op-Eds are a common format in media writing, often used on news sites and in newspapers, magazines and trade-industry publications, to raise awareness of a current issue. But they often do more than just raise attention—they *state a position on the issue and they ask readers to take some kind of action*. That action varies depending on the subject and reader: to vote, to develop some new legislation, to challenge a public official or athlete, to participate in a public action like a protest, to pressure school administrators or company executives.

Types of Op-Eds

Opinion columns are usually written by journalists on a beat (covering the city, or politics, or sports, for example) or PR professionals who are paid to present the position of a particular company, advocacy group or public official on an issue. Outside experts may also be invited to present their opinion in this kind of public forum.

Editorials are usually written by the publisher or an editorial board member for the media outlet. They represent the view of the media outlet's publisher or board, rather than an individual writer. Editorials are usually unsigned, unlike an opinion column, which has a byline.

Note that social-media posts are different from an op-ed in form and style.

Subjects and Timeliness of Op-Eds

Good op-eds should focus on a compelling subject that many readers will care about, and should keep the focus narrow enough to tackle in a short space (usually about 500-1000 words). For example, public safety is the topic of many op-eds, but they typically address one facet of the broader issue, such as the need for more protected bike lanes.

One key method to narrow the subject and to make it timely is to tie the op-ed to a recent controversy or news item. For instance, if a national organization just released a report on an increase in sexual assault on college campuses, a columnist might write an op-ed about the ways local colleges are handling sexual assault allegations and how assaults might be reduced.

Opinions and Evidence

Op-eds do more than just report news—they assert a viewpoint on the issue. That means stating direct opinions and developing reasons for those opinions. In most cases, writers will use third person to state those opinions, but some columnists write with a first-person “I” voice to add a sense of personal style and perspective. A powerful argument may use elements of logos, pathos, and ethos to move readers.

To be credible, opinions need supporting evidence. What kinds of evidence may vary, depending on the subject. Here are some common forms of evidence:

- Recent polls on the issue.
- Findings in recent studies of the issue.
- Information gleaned from credible websites (be careful to acknowledge any biases those websites may have).
- Quotes from knowledgeable authorities on the issue.
- Anecdotes that illustrate the issue in action.

Note that in all cases, you need an informal citation of the source, so that readers can judge the source’s credibility. (Op-eds usually use a casual Associated Press citation style, rather than something more formal, such as MLA or footnotes.)

Structure

An op-ed’s structure typically follows the pattern below, though the structure may vary depending on the writer’s style and publication:

- Begin with a provocative opening that focuses on the issue
- State your position
- Develop your reasoning and provide supporting evidence
- Bow to the opposition (acknowledge possible counterpoints)
- Conclude with a call to action

See *Writing in the Works* (Blau and Burak) Chapter 12 for more details on writing op-eds and argumentative essays.

The article on the following pages is a sample op-ed from the Boston Globe. Take a look at how journalist Tom Keane structures his piece and incorporates key elements of a standard op-ed.

"Governor Baker, lift the ban so adults can vape" by Tom Keane

Mountain climbing is dangerous. Skiing is dangerous. But the long arm of the law doesn't reach out and say folks can't climb or ski. There's a basic logic to this: If you know the risks, and you're still willing to take your chances, you should be allowed to do what you want. It's your life, after all.

Lively opening

So why doesn't this logic apply to vaping?

Two weeks ago, Governor Charlie Baker pushed through a [ban on vaping](#). Although it applies only to those who sell e-cigarette supplies, and it's for only four months, the net effect for most who vape is that they can no longer engage in the practice. Some are heading to New Hampshire for their supplies, and others might turn to the black market. But for the rest, vaping is no longer an option.

Recent news

At the time of the ban, there was a near panic over a spate of lung-related illnesses and deaths, all of which seemed to be tied to vaping. (The first death [linked to vaping in Massachusetts](#) was reported on Monday.) Doctors and public health professionals had no idea what was going on, and Baker's ban was borne out of this confusion. The argument was that a ban was warranted because, in fact, no one knew what the risks were.

Fair enough. But the Internet and social media are wonderful things, and the fact is that today pretty much everyone is aware of these once-unknown risks. The news of those illnesses and deaths have been trumpeted everywhere. So does the ban still make sense? **If folks want to vape — knowing, as they now do, that they might face imminent hospitalization — shouldn't they be allowed to do so?**

Position statement

It's their lives, after all.

I go back and forth on this one, in part because it's more complicated than just knowingly taking a risk.

For one, it's an addictive risk. Most vapers use the devices to inhale nicotine, and sometimes at [levels far greater than cigarettes](#). There's a widespread belief among vapers that vaping doesn't have the same risks as cigarettes, in large part because they don't have cigarette cancer-causing tars and other harsh ingredients. But nicotine itself is dangerous, capable of causing much harm, including adverse effects on "the heart,

Bow to the opposition

reproductive system, lung, kidney, etc. (as well as) carcinogenic potential,” according to the [National Institutes of Health](#).

Cite evidence

Granted, even with potentially addictive substances, we usually let adults make their own decisions. But in the case of vaping, manufacturers — [Juul](#) is the prime example — targeted their products to kids, with child-friendly flavors such as mint, mango, and fruit. And those kids, almost by definition, are unable to make reasoned, mature decisions about what risks they should and shouldn’t take. Yet an addictive habit picked up as a teen is extraordinarily hard to shake as an adult. Juul was going as young as it could so it might create a life-long consumer — and that’s appalling.

Bow to the opposition

Still, if we could keep e-cigarettes out of the hands of kids, one could make the case that we should allow adults to vape if they wish. We do so with conventional cigarettes, coupling their sales with grim warnings on every pack. That, it seems, is the direction that Governor Gina Raimondo of Rhode Island went. After Baker put in place his ban, she followed with one of her own, but one that was more narrowly drawn, [targeting the flavored e-cigs](#) that most seemed to appeal to kids. Her approach seems to be the more reasoned.

Support for the author’s view

I’m no fan of the industry. I’ve never smoked or vaped. But an essential tenet of freedom is the right to take risks. We don’t have the right to impose those risks on others (hence, bans on smoking in bars or restaurants), but adults — presumably capable of making reasoned choices for themselves — should have the right to impose those risks on themselves. The public health community was delighted when Baker imposed his ban, and I understand why — they see all issues like this through the lens of morbidity and mortality.

Central Reasoning

But if adults want to vape — and they do so knowing not only the long-term risks but also the potential short-term issues — they should be able to do so. Baker should issue a new ban, one more narrowly tailored to protect kids, and let adults do what they want.

Conclusion and call to action

Keane, Tom. “Governor Baker, lift the ban so adults can vape.” *Boston Globe*. 7 October, 2019. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2019/10/07/governor-baker-lift-ban-adults-can-vape/xGKffc4jyEKsCqAAJ5hf7l/story.html>.