

**From *Writing Dissent: Taking radical ideas from the margins to the mainstream.*
Robert Jensen. Peter Lang, New York. 2005**

Some Definitions and the Layout of the Editorial Section of a Newspaper

1. Most daily newspapers have two pages for opinion writing, most often called the editorial page and the OpEd page.
2. Typically the editorial page contains several short, unsigned pieces that are presented as the institutional voice of the paper. These are what journalists call an editorial. This page usually also contains an editorial cartoon and letters to the editor—the responses from readers to articles in the paper (usually no more than 200 words).
3. “OpEd” stands for “*opposite the editorial page*” and is used to describe the opinion pieces that are on the page facing the newspaper’s editorials.
4. Three general types of articles run on the OpEd page: syndicated columns, signed columns by newspaper staff members, and pieces by people outside the newspaper. Those pieces that come from syndicated and staff writers are commonly referred to as “columns,” while the pieces by nonstaff are usually called “OpEds,” which run from 400 to 800 words.

General Practices

5. Most editors feel an obligation to run critiques of stories that have appeared in their paper, though they won’t (and can’t because of space limitations) run every letter they get.
6. Most editors make good-faith attempts to produce a page with some diversity of opinion.
7. Editors also like controversial pieces that stir up readers and generate letters to the editor.
8. But getting your letter published is not the only measure of success; often a deluge of letters will force editors to publish a representative sample, and your unpublished letter could be part of that a critical mass.
9. Most papers won’t accept a letter on behalf of a group; an individual has to sign it.

Some Suggestions

10. Don’t try to accomplish too much in one piece.
11. Learn to be merciless in editing yourself, in cutting unnecessary words and phrases. An effective OpEd is not so much a product of writing but of rewriting and editing.
12. Make editors understand that your views—no matter how radical—are not flaky and idiosyncratic, but represent a constituency. Avoid phrases that will be seen as left-wing clichés. Editors are turned off by anything that smacks of ideological fanaticism.

News Hooks or Pegs that Help a Submission Get Printed

13. Commentary on an event or issue

- Must be timely and distinctive.
- An issue can be a couple of days old—sometimes even a couple of weeks old—and still be relevant. And some ongoing stories provide multiple opportunities for submission.
- Plus, editors are looking for pieces from local writers that don’t say exactly the same thing as what they have read on the wires.

14. Responding to conventional wisdom (they’ve got it all wrong)

- Confront conventional wisdom head on, arguing that the taken-as-obvious points are not only wrong but based on untenable assumptions—wrong all the way down.

Example: If we really want to *Support the Troops*, well then stay out of war. Use diplomacy instead.

- One of the reasons mainstream media has such a powerful influence over what we think is that certain core ideas are repeated over and over, a drumbeat of conventional wisdom.
- U.S. citizens must begin to understand that our government's actions in the international arena cannot be assumed to be just and moral, but must constantly be examined and challenged. That's the task of people of conscience who live in an empire.

15. Piggybacking on the news

- Sometimes a news story can be used as a springboard for a submission that isn't directly concerned with the news item itself and allows a deeper critique. Because editors feel safer with a piece that plays off something current, it's always good to keep an eye open for that kind of opportunity.
- Example: "On speaking of missile defense research, the program does what it was designed to do: transfer money from the pockets of taxpayers to corporations. What matters to decision-makers is the flow of public subsidies for high-tech industries, always one of the key functions of the Pentagon budget. But while we dump billions into such plans year after year, remember what is going underfunded or unfunded: quality education for all students, child care, national health insurance and a host of other social programs that could actually benefit the people of this country and serve the national interest.

16. Anniversaries and holidays

- One of the easiest news hooks for an LTE or OpEd is an anniversary. And these dates are predictable.
- Our U.S. culture in general seems to like the opportunity to look back, and journalists especially find them irresistible.
- Once the country's mistakes are safely in the past, our culture can sometimes acknowledge them. Tease out the lessons in history that should be applied today.

17. Getting personal

- Telling stories, especially personal stories, can be effective in a way that straightforward arguments are not. They can crystallize a political point and convey more than traditional arguments.
- However, pieces that lean too heavily on sentiment also can be dangerous. Che Guevaras: "the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love."

18. Counter-offensives

- One opportunity to inject radical opinions into the mainstream comes when local organizing is covered, or miscovered, by the local paper. These problems can be remedied by a correction written by the paper, or a letter to the editor from the activist.
- But if a paper makes egregious errors in reporting or in editorials, and especially if it makes them consistently over time, activists can sometimes argue that out of fairness we deserve OpEd space to respond.
- Remember, the failure to get space to respond at one point in time doesn't mean the effort was wasted. Often it is the cumulative pressure that brings the desired results somewhere down the road.