Newspaper Op-Ed Essay Specifications and Lecture
ENGL 1121 (Wrobel)

[I will still be tweaking this document over the next couple weeks – mostly adding more stuff]

Assignment Overview

Your assignment for the Op-Ed Essay it to write a short essay about a topic that is of important to college students and submit it, through me, to The Rampage, for publication consideration. Though the form of the essay differs a bit from the Arguing a Position Essay, the same Basic Principles of Argument you have learned will still apply. You will write one draft, which will be workshopped, and then revise for a grade and submission-for-publication. Note that the grade/evaluation of the essay is entirely separate from the possible publishing of the Op-Ed Essay (which is purely the discretion of the newspaper staff).

The audience you will be addressing is primarily college students, and most significantly, those might disagree with your. The purpose of the Op-Ed Essay is to convince opponents to come around to your way of thinking, not to “preach to the already-converted.”

Note: An “Op-Ed” means, literally, the “Opposite Side of the Editorial Page.” The “Op” does not mean “Opinion.” On the editorial page, commentaries are written by the newspaper editorial staffs, while the “Op-Ed” page is devoted to articles from people “outside” of the staff, primarily readers and community members, some of whom are writing in response to the staff editorials.

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Minimum Essay Requirements

1. **Essay Length: 250-300 words** (for both draft and final revision).

2. **Format Specifications.** Follow standard MLA manuscript format except for the changes listed further down in the lecture (The Visual Format of the Article).
   
   http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/resdoc5e/RES5e_ch08_s1-0013.html

3. **Source Requirements:** zero to no more than four sources. Sources are not required, but encouraged, if they are relevant to the work. If a student’s independent reasoning and logic alone can support the argument, then fine, but that’s rarely the case. If outside support is needed, it should be used. Primary sources, such as interviews and surveys, are most typical for articles about college issues.

4. **Source citation.** If using sources, for both the draft and the final, all borrowed information must be cited in-text, MLA style, and include a full works cited on the last page of the essay (though the works cited list does not count as a page toward the essay’s minimum page-count expectations). Though the editors might not use the works cited list, it should still be included for evaluation. Note that there are some differences from standard MLA, which are explained below. See: “Should I Include Research and Should I Cite it?”

5. Indicate in your header the Op-Ed Essay “form” you are writing in, either “Arguing a Position on an Issue” or “Proposing a Solution.” The two main “forms” of Op-Eds I would like you to choose from will be:
   
   a. Arguing a Position on an Issue. You can argue one side of a question at issue as you did in the Arguing a Position Essay by answering a clear and well-focused question at issue. Examples: Toughen safeguards for moving oil by rail.
   
   b. Or you can define a problem and propose to solve it. (See instructions below).

6. **Submission Instructions:**
   
   a. **1st Draft:** Save draft as “1DraftOpEd_your last name” and submit as an MS WORD file to the D2L Discussion Board in the correctly labeled folder. Also submit the 1st draft to Turnitin.com for citation analysis.
b. **Final Revision:** Save as "RevOpEd_your last name" and submit your essay as an MS WORD file to the D2L Dropbox (not the discussion board) in the correctly labeled folder. All folders have the name of the specific essay assignment and version.

**Topic Selection Advice**

Topics should be “issues” or “problems” and should be localized. From Trisha Collopy, *Rampage* advisor:

Larger political topics have in general not generated much response/debate when we've tried them. Except for the last election where two hot-button issues, the marriage amendment and Voter ID, were on the ballot. Lots of students had strong opinions about those. If students want to write about something like Obamacare, I can see some good articles, but those grounded in their own specific experience will be strongest. *Essays that take a predictable political line don't tend to be persuasive or well-read* [italics mine].”

I'd love to see a whole stack of op-ed pieces about campus issues. Our students struggle with all kinds of issues are worth tackling and they sometimes don't realize others also experience, from balancing work and school, to being a first-generation college student, to domestic violence, and even homelessness. Anything that gets them more engaged with the people around them is a plus!

A sample of some issues from my Mass Comm students last semester are here: [http://cowbird.com/6ayeky/feed/](http://cowbird.com/6ayeky/feed/)

You should begin considering topics by scanning around the stories, opinion columns, and case-articles in the following resources. Knowing a good deal about the kinds of issues and problems that are currently being battled-around is important:

- First Amendment Center
- ACLU website
- Student Press Law Center
- *Minnesota Daily Opinion Page* (and archives)
Topic Criteria

- The topic should be expressed as an “issue” or a “problem” of concern to college students;

- The topic should be timely; the issue or problem should be happening now;

- The topic is close to home in that it affects students on our campus (or tangentially, online students);

As you are thinking about a relevant campus issue to talk about, you should definitely read previous articles in the “Viewpoints” section of *The Campus Eye*, where the chosen essays will appear.

Topic Selection: Personal versus Public Issues

When choosing a topic, it is important to avoid personal gripes. For instance, if you have an argument about a particular professor, avoid “going” there. And as a larger ethical principle of Op-Ed writing, individuals should not be named. The only cases where this is appropriate is if you are a) writing in response to a previously “published” editorial or Op-Ed, story, column etc. It is appropriate to name names of people who have previously been published and thus “gone public” with their viewpoints. It is not appropriate, however, to name names of individuals who have not.

Along these same lines, another case where it is appropriate to name names is in the case of “public figures,” usually those in positions of authority, who have “gone public” with decisions or policies that affect a number of people (corporate leaders, politicians, and so forth).

At the same time, I want you to select a topic that you have a personal stake in. The key thing to avoid, however, is to avoid writing about an individual versus an individual gripe, and to not take a tone of complaint or appear that the issue is all about you and the people who agree with you and people who disagree don’t matter (more on this in the “Voice: Expression versus Communication.” There needs to be a community aspect to the article.
The Visual Format of the Article

If the essay is accepted for publication, the editors will most likely re-format the essay toward their own preferences, but for the draft and revision that you submit to me, standard MLA manuscript format should be followed. If the previous link gives you fits, use this URL:

http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/resdoc5e/RES5e_ch08_s1-0013.html

Sources should be cited in MLA format, also, which means sources should be cited MLA-style, also, with a works cited list, but also, if you are using online sources, those should be cited in-text as embedded hyperlinks rather than using citation markers. Make sense?

Should I have Research and Should I Cite it?

Yes, where relevant, and yes, in MLA format, but with the following changes:

If you use research via the interweb to support your claims, you will provide embedded hyperlinks to the source material rather than citing in-text using citation markers. The embedded hyperlink should link directly to the source you mention. See this Minneapolis Star-Tribune article an as example:

State should aid the wrongly convicted

If, however, the source was found through one of the databases, an embedded hyperlink will not work since the reader would be required to have a subscription, as you do. So in those case, cite in standard MLA in-text citation, with the citation markers in parenthesis.

All sources, whether cited in-text via embedded hyperlink or citation marker, must also be cited in a Works Cited List at the end of the essay. Though the editorial staff may decide not to use your works cited list if your article is selected for publication, you should still include it for me for grading/evaluation.

Most importantly, since your topic should be college-related, you should consider conducting a personal interview or two or even a survey. Primary research is terrific for Op-Eds precisely because it’s so rare. The subject of the interview should be professional who is relevant to the issue. If not a professional, then a student or two. The key here is that the students shouldn’t just be any students or friends, but students who are specifically affected by the issue that you are writing about.
Can I Include Photos or Video?

Of course. The key is: is it relevant to supporting your argument? If you have an appropriate and relevant photograph, you can insert it at the top of the article. See these two examples from *The Rampage*: “Community College Stigma” and “Online, but not on the same page” (not technically an Op-Ed, but still a good “format” example – more an Editorial than an Op-Ed).

Images must be very relevant to the story. Avoid inserting images such as the stuff found on blogs, or pictures of waffles.

Another thing to consider is that many editorial staffs select their own photographs, if any, to pair up with articles they accept from outsiders or, they may choose an article based on the writing itself and decide not to use the picture submitted with it.

However, if you do include an image, place it left-justified between the title and the first sentence of the essay, and caption it. Again, here’s an example of a properly formatted and captioned photo: Community College Stigma

How to Write an Op-Ed

Criteria for a Good Op-Ed:

- The writer takes a fresh angle or raises questions that will stimulate debate.

- All of the things that make a strong Arguing a Position Essay (clear reasoning, relevant research, an emphasis on reasoning and facts rather than name-calling, considering other viewpoints), also make a strong op-ed piece.

- Most Op-Eds are written in Arguing a Position or Proposal form. You can writer in either form:
Arguing a Position-Style Op-Ed

The same basic criteria you worked on in your Arguing a Position Essay apply here, with the main differences being that the essay is shorter (250-300), not as source-heavy, and allows more room for “voice,” which I’ll talk about in a minute.

Here are some examples of Arguing a Position-style letters to the editor from the Minnesota Daily, the student newspaper of the University of Minnesota:

“Should the State of the Union read more like a research thesis?”

“Education should be a right”

“Grade inflation isn’t the issue; lack of context is”

Proposing a Solution-Style Op-Ed

The purpose of a proposal is to first identify a significant, relevant problem that affects the college community, and offer a detailed action plan to solve the problem.

There are some basic parts to a proposal, which are included here in outline form:

I. Introduction: Define and Explain Problem, State Overall Solution.

II. Explain Alternative Solutions (ones that have been tried but failed) if there have been any that have failed.

III. Present Your Solution in Detail + Benefits to explain why your solution will work whereas the others have not.

IV. Conclusion: Restate severity of Problem + benefits

The Basic Features with Elaboration

I. Introduction. Leads to thesis sentence/question at end of first paragraph. Should define problem, in one or two paragraphs, by specific methods:

1. Specific example of problem; specific case.
2. Historical example of problem; background on evolution of problem.
3. Show people being affected by problem.
4. Pose your solution/thesis at end of first or second paragraph. Thesis statement defines solution for reader, or, hints at a solution but doesn't come right out with it.
II: Examine Alternative Solutions

1. Analyze the most recent alternative solution (one that has been tried but failed); explain its full process, in detail, and its results.
   
   2. Refutation: Diminish the effectiveness of the alternative solution by pointing out its weaknesses. A paragraph should suffice for detailed elaboration on each weakness of solution.
   
   3. Repeat steps one and two above, depending on the number of alternative solutions you’ve decided to address, and if you have space in the article. For an Op-Ed, this section will be shorter than if writing a full essay.

III. Your Solution

1. Explain your solution, in detail. The number of paragraphs depends on how many points your solution entails. Remember, you should be directing specific people to take action.
   
   2. Explain to reader the benefits of your solution, relating to feasibility and the positive impact your solution will have on the college community.
   
   3. It's also an option to integrate alternative solutions into your own solution, pointing out how your solution (steps of action) would be more likely than the alternative solution's to solve the problem.

IV. Conclusion

1. Restate severity of problem; negative benefits of alternative solutions, then;
   
   2. Restate benefits of solution and leave reader with overall statement of the positive effect your solution will have.

A Note on Transitions:

Make sure that the last sentence of each paragraph cues the topic sentence of the next paragraph; the reverse is also true.

Each sentence is an idea, thus each subsequent idea (sentence) should follow logically from the last. Each idea grows until there is a reasonable conclusion, which will be the resolution/conclusion of the paragraph.

In the essay, no sentences are wasted. Each sentence must be logically connected to the sentence before and after it.

Here are some real-life examples of Op-Ed proposals:

“U has too little off-street parking”
How Do I Support my Thesis?

If you are answering a question at issue, you will provide support the same way you did in the Arguing a Position Essay, only with less emphasis on formal research.

Your thesis should clearly indicate your stance on the issue, but in the interests of time and space, you do not need a detailed list of your supporting premises in the thesis. Instead, you will argue the reasons in the body of the article, in the order you find most effective.

Unlike the Arguing a Position Essay, you do NOT need to embolden your thesis and premises.

You should support your opinion with a blend of the following:

- Personal anecdote (story) from experience.
- Anecdote from another person’s experience (through interview).
- Examples via analogy/comparison.
- Examples via scenario.
- Examples via observations of real-life experience.
- Relevant research (data, statistics, etc.).

What are Opinions?

“Opinion” is a broad term referring to an assertion or viewpoint that is supported more by personal belief and “feeling” rather than logic or evidence. Because of this, the term often has negative connotations. The important thing to realize is that

a) not all opinions are automatically bad just because they are subjective, and

b) not all opinions are automatically good just because they may be subjective.

A “feeling” does not make an opinion a sound one; a feeling just makes a feeling. Instead, reasons do, and reasoning based on good logic and strong evidence makes opinions strong. Remember the equation that applies to writing an arguing a position essay also applies to Op-Ed writing:

Information + sound critical reasoning about the information = Knowledge

See: Written Argument: Basic Principles

In our culture, we’ve been trained by the self-help industry (motivational speakers, psychologists, and Mr. Rogers) to “own” our feelings and that our feelings need to be
“validated” by others, which leads sometimes to a fallacy that all feelings are justifiable and therefore strong support for opinions and beliefs.

There’s a big danger in that that I won’t go into right now, but suffice it to say, not all opinions are equal and not all feelings deserve to be validated. Some opinions are just plain bad, and even dangerous.

All opinions are not equal. Some are good, some are bad. Some are well-supported; other’s aren’t. Your job is to support your opinions with reasoning, experience, observation, and research.

Opinions, the word itself, is too broad. Opinions are expressed in different forms. First, and opinion is an “assertion.”

Different kinds of opinions are:

- Expressions of Taste
- Expressions of Judgments
- Stances on Issues
- Beliefs
- Assumptions
- Logical conclusions

**Voice and Tone: Expression of the “I”**

What sets Op-Ed writing apart from academic writing is “voice.” A little more latitude is allowed for writing in first-person point of view, the old “I/me/mine.”

There are a lot of definitions about what “voice” means in writing, but it comes down to this: the author’s individual personality is reflected in the tone and style of the writing.

This means that writers can crack jokes, relate personal observations and experiences, and so forth. Consequently, writers are also freer in Op-Eds to use the first-person pronoun “I.” However, this does not give the writer permission to do and say whatever he/she wants. Not “anything goes.” The writer should still try to avoid bias, and most importantly, back up his or her assertions with strong reasoning and even evidence rather than merely belief, assumption, or opinion.

Though self-reference is allowable, and “voice,” the argument should not be solely personal, so much so that it would indicate bias, which we’ve covered. If the writer is simple trying to advance a personal ideological agenda, readers can sniff that out. If a writer is all like, “Me, me, me,” readers will be turned off.
It’s okay to express beliefs, but it’s most important to “communicate ideas” rather than “express emotions.” Even though this is an Op-Ed, and there is thus more latitude in expressing personal belief, careful reasoning, and research, if needed, is also expected to support those beliefs.

Thus, logical fallacies should be avoided, especially the following:

Ad Hominem (Personal Attacks): http://www.fallacyfiles.org/adhomine.html
Ad Ignorantiam: http://www.fallacyfiles.org/ignorant.html
Assumptions: http://ardictionary.com/Assumption/9749
Either/Or Propositions: http://www.fallacyfiles.org/eitheror.html
False Analogies: http://www.fallacyfiles.org/wanalogy.html
Generalizations: http://www.fallacyfiles.org/hastygen.html
Bandwagon: http://www.fallacyfiles.org/bandwagn.html
Poisoning of the Wells: http://www.fallacyfiles.org/poiswell.html
Slippery Slopes: http://www.fallacyfiles.org/slipslop.html

Expressing emotions is okay and has its place, but just being angry is not going to help convince readers to go your way. Emotions, when unchecked, are a big turn off to those who might not agree with you, and the purpose of the Op-Ed is to convince opponents to come around to your way of thinking, not to “preach to the converted.”

8 100-Year Old Tips for Writing About Controversial Topics

Most important when considering “Voice” in OpEd writing is “tone,” which refers to the emotional attitude of the writer.

Anger and indignation are some of the driving emotions behind people writing OpEd’s in the first place, but pure anger and indignation usually repel readers. Who wants, even in real-life, so sit around and listen to someone beller their opinions and be all self-righteous?

Not many. Not even the self-righteous like to listen to the self-righteous.

To be clear, the “self-righteous” are those human beings who pretend to have no weaknesses.

At the same time, anger and indignation coupled with humor, can make persuasive writing tolerable and even enjoyable. Even the self-righteous, if funny, can sometimes get away with it. Most importantly, instead of merely pointing fingers at others (or an institutions, authority
figures, etc.) it is critical also to point out one’s own weaknesses, also, to be relevantly self-deprecating.

Humor, sarcasm, and self-deprecation can work to help create common ground with readers.

For this kind of writing, being charming and affable is almost as important as delivering a logical, well-reasoned argument.

Here are some examples of humorous OpEds:

Who Goes to Work to Have Fun?

The Onion is the Country’s Best Op Ed Page. Seriously.