



# Placing an Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor in Your Student Newspaper

Placing an op-ed or letter to the editor in a student newspaper is one of the most effective ways to draw attention to an issue and spur action on campus. Unlike a personal blog or social media profile, campus newspapers are often read and taken seriously by large numbers of students, staff, faculty, parents, and even those outside of your campus community. While not all students read campus newspapers, the ones who do are likely to be among the most engaged on campus. Furthermore, influential alumni often read the student newspaper to stay up to date with events at their *alma mater*. Both groups are audiences that are important to reach in an effort to create change at your institution.

Since official university publications often strive to present the school in a uniformly positive light, student newspapers play a unique and important role when something is amiss on campus. When campus controversies make it into the national media cycle, campus newspapers are very often the first to raise the issue. Thus, writing an op-ed or letter to the editor is not only a great way to exercise your expressive rights, it's an opportunity to participate in the noblest and most vital tradition of the free press—holding those in power accountable by making their actions public.

Newspaper articles are a great tool when working to reform unconstitutional speech codes or policies that are out of line with the institution's promises of free expression. Many of the most egregiously unconstitutional restrictions on student speech survive for years only because very few people are aware that the policies exist at all. By letting your campus know that your school maintains unconstitutional policies and explaining how students might be affected, you can raise the awareness and interest necessary to pressure school leadership into changing their policies.

But writing an effective op-ed isn't as simple as just writing down your opinion and sending it off. Crafting a persuasive argument in an engaging style—and convincing your campus paper to publish it—can be challenging. To help you get started, we've put together a few tips on writing the best possible piece.

## **KNOW YOUR PAPER.**

Most campuses have at least one newspaper, typically with both a print and online edition. Some campus newspapers strive for objectivity and balance, and some embrace a particular editorial perspective. It is important that you understand the style and typical content of the publication you intend to submit to before you begin writing. Be sure to check the newspaper's archives to see if other articles have been written on your topic and what views were taken—then make sure to reference them in your op-ed.

## **UNDERSTAND THE RULES, AND FOLLOW THEM.**

Many publications have rigid guidelines for guest submissions and will not consider pieces that do not comply with them. For an op-ed, you may need to “pitch” your idea to an editor before submitting,



or pre-arrange a deadline. At the very least, there is likely to be a minimum and maximum allowed word count. While most newspapers publish these guidelines on their website, if you're unsure what the rules for guest submissions are, ask the newspaper's opinion editor directly. There are always exceptions and special cases, but it's important to follow all provided guidelines to ensure your piece gets published.

### **BE CONCISE.**

When in doubt, write less. This cannot be stressed enough—students are so busy with homework, sports, jobs, and extracurricular activities that they often do not have time for a lengthy explanation of why a particular college policy is worth fighting. Make your piece brief and to the point and it will have a much better chance of being read.

### **UNDERSTAND THE POLICY.**

Make sure that you really understand why the free speech zone, harassment policy, or other provision you are referencing is problematic. It is important that you avoid misstating the case against the policy; you will look uninformed and it will only hurt your efforts. Don't hesitate to **ask FIRE** for help identifying which policies are most problematic at your school and explaining why.

### **USE EXAMPLES.**

To highlight a particularly egregious problem on your campus, it is often helpful to show examples of how similar cases have gone awry at other campuses. By showing the ridiculous results that can come from applying these policies, you can help people realize how silly and dangerous to free speech they are. Craft an "imagine if ..." narrative for your readers to explain how the policy could go wrong. If your school's policy bans "offensive or insulting jokes," then you could point out that many common jokes would be banned, and explain that while a sharply worded joke might be offensive, that does not mean students should be banned from telling them. Or, in the case of a restrictive "free speech zone" that requires 48 hours' notice before any protest can be held, you could use the example of September 11. Imagine, you might write, that students wanted to hold a campus memorial or rally on that day. Under a prior approval policy with no exceptions for spontaneous speech, such an act would have been effectively impossible. If you need help coming up with examples, explore previous FIRE cases.

### **PROVIDE SOURCES.**

Your article is not a research paper, but you should still include one or two citations that back up your argument. If you use statistics, it is especially important to cite your source for credibility. You can also direct readers to **FIRE's website** and explain how they can find their school's **Spotlight** page and **past cases**.

### **ANTICIPATE COUNTER-ARGUMENTS.**

The best persuasive writing predicts likely objections and explains, briefly, why they don't hold true. Your tone shouldn't sound defensive, but it's worth understanding common arguments against protecting unfettered speech or rigorous due process on campus, and preemptively responding. Doing this reinforces your point and makes clear that you understand the complexity of the issue.



### MAKE IT PERSONAL.

The more you can make the issue hit home for the reader, or apply specifically to your campus, the better. You don't want to spend time crafting an article and have students brush it off or not understand how the issue impacts them. Make sure to explain the implications of being suspended for telling a joke that someone found offensive, or being unable to defend yourself while being investigated for demonstrating for a cause you care about outside a tiny "free speech zone."

### INSPIRE ACTION.

Considering how involved most students are, it is important to leave them with an outlet for action once they are convinced by your excellent op-ed arguments! Be sure to close your piece with some ideas on what they can do to help out. Depending on the type of students on your campus (and you know your classmates best), you can suggest things like writing letters to the college president or board of trustees, encourage them to join a Facebook group or email listserv to discuss the issue in more depth, or invite them to a protest you are organizing.

### BE WARY OF THE COMMENTS SECTION.

Many online newspapers will publish your article above a comments section where readers can respond. Controversial articles—and op-eds in particular—often attract heated, personal, and vitriolic responses. Don't feel like you have to engage with everyone if you don't feel like they are making an earnest effort to discuss the merits of the issue. Avoid the temptation to engage with unproductive commenters. Some publications prohibit this outright, but even if yours doesn't, responding to comments rarely makes you look better. Have confidence in your original piece and let the debate unfold as it will. The point of op-eds is to start conversations, not end them.

#### Op-Ed Examples:

- [Some Speech Hurts—and That's Okay](#) (*The Brown Daily Herald*, Brown University)
- [Single Investigator Model for Sexual Misconduct Threatens Civil Liberties for all Students](#) (*The Review*, University of Delaware)
- [An Open Letter to President Brodhead](#) (*The Chronicle*, Duke University)
- [The illiberal impulse: Talking Backward. This Banned Book Week we should commit to protecting even the thought we hate](#) (*The Daily Pennsylvanian*, University of Pennsylvania)