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How to Write a Killer Op-Ed: Sharpening the Persuasive Writing Blade

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Nurses can change the world by writing op-eds. That's not necessarily accurate, but if it were, it's the kind of strong claim that might catch the eye of an op-ed editor and a newspaper audience (as long as it's followed by a compelling argument, of course). The modern op-ed, as we know it, came to form in 1970 in the NY Times. It was named for its geographical location in the paper, that is, opposite the editorial page and was designed to allow for opposing views that veered from the traditional views of the newspaper.

Op-eds provide a unique opportunity for anyone in the community to express an opinion with a well-researched argument. For nurses, in particular, op-eds provide a fairly easily accessible format in which the nursing voice can be heard by the media, the healthcare industry, and the public. A well-timed, well-written op-ed can incite important discussion, demonstrate the clinical expertise of nurses to the public, and help elevate the nursing profession to a greater degree of visibility.

Op-eds that see the light of day share a number of characteristics. Typically they're timely and newsworthy, sometimes controversial, and they pose an interesting interpretation of the topic at hand. This might be a convincing argument for or against a policy change, a nurse's perspective on a public health issue, or a response to a highly visible malpractice case. Whatever the topic, op-eds that get published have a strong voice, a fresh take on a subject, and a clear argument. While newspapers have specific op-ed submission and word count guidelines, most op-eds traditionally run between 600 and 1200 words. A happy medium seems to live somewhere in 750 words. Not a lot of space to write a well-rounded and gripping opinion!

So how do you do that? Even for those who don't normally work with an outline, in the case of an op-ed, it can keep your argument on the straight and narrow. When you've focused in on a topic, sketch out a brief overview. What's your main objective? Why does it matter? Identify the best two to three talking points that will support your main objective. Stick with a singular position. For a strong argument in a limited word count, there remains little room for, "and another thing!" Save that for another op-ed. Add one or two brief points to conclude. With that outline in mind, flesh out each section. At this point, don't pay any attention to word count or grammar. Speak to each point of the outline and use it as a guide to keep you on a direct path.

The first sentence of the op-ed—the hook—needs a strong punch to engage the reader in the issue. This may be in the form of a startling statistic, a strongly worded claim or a notable fact that will lead the reader to the introduction of the topic in the following sentences. Tying the hook into a current issue in the media is more likely to grab an editor's eye.

The second paragraph should delve a little deeper. What is the issue at hand? And most importantly,

so what? Why does it matter at all? In the third paragraph, use some well-grounded examples to reinforce your argument. A personal or clinical anecdote, scholarly research, graphs and data can strengthen your position and drive you toward the conclusion. The final paragraph should speak to the main idea in the introduction, but in addition should include a final, memorable statement or a strong request for the reader to act.

Now that the body of the piece is on paper, you can begin chiseling and tailoring your words to make each one count as much as possible. If you've surpassed the ideal word count, start paring down by replacing any passive language with more active and concise word choices. Do you notice any repetitive talking points? See if you can remove one or merge them if they're similar enough. Is one of your arguments too general? Refer back to your research to look for an impressive statistic, interesting literature finding, or illustrative quote that might make a more direct point in fewer words.

When you've honed it as much as you can, ask at least two people to read it and provide feedback. A nurse colleague would be a great choice, in addition to someone who doesn't have a healthcare background. Ask each reader what he or she thinks your main objective is. The answer may clue you in as to whether you've communicated what you intended to or not.

When your op-ed has been accepted for publication, you can expect to sign a contract. Your piece will be edited and fact checked. And no matter how great your headline, the editorial staff will most likely replace it with one of its own making. Most papers give some compensation for a printed op-ed, although the monetary value is often small. Keep in mind that while the NY Times and other major city newspapers may be the Holy Grail of op-eds, local newspapers provide ample opportunity to make an impact in the public regarding a given issue.

A few guidelines worth noting:

- Avoid medical jargon wherever possible: Keep in mind that while healthcare professionals may be reading your op-ed, you'll be reaching a more general audience as well.
- Write it the way you'd say it: The tone of op-eds is typically conversational. Occasionally humor, when appropriate, is well received.
- HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) guidelines apply: Perhaps it goes without saying, but HIPAA guidelines in the USA and similar ones in other countries should be followed closely; avoid any clinical anecdotes with revealing details that may uncover the identity of a particular patient.
- Give pause to the other side of the argument: The acknowledgment of an opposing argument gives credibility and a deeper level of thoughtfulness to your position.

Especially in this digital age, nurses have a great deal of power for the harnessing when it comes to educating the public and policy makers alike. Nurses, especially nurses who are writers, should be writing op-eds. Will you?

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