A well written op-ed can be a highly effective political act. A compelling argument distributed to a national audience, or a smaller, more targeted audience, can define the terms of an issue and incite a constituency, civic group, or legislator to take action. To be effective, an op-ed must be persuasive: you must convince the reader to adopt a new perspective, either to view the issue in a new way, or, if they already agree with your position, to take action on this issue. Your task is made more difficult by the fact that, in our media saturated age, the reader, inundated with appeals, has naturally become suspicious of claims made on her opinions, time, money, and resources. To write a successful op-ed, therefore, you must convince the reader of your credibility—that you are honest, thoughtful, and have her best interests and the best interests of her political group (town, county, state, nation, and/or world) at heart.

**A U D I E N C E**

Like a policy memo, an op-ed presents a concise, well articulated argument in which your position is made clear from the beginning and the various parts work closely together to persuade the reader to agree with this argument. However, policy memos and op-eds differ in that the former is written for a small audience, in most cases, a reader quite familiar to you (e.g., your boss) who has requested your analysis on a specific topic with which she is already knowledgeable. By contrast, an op-ed is written for a large, indeterminate audience whose sympathies and opinions may be diverse and perhaps not immediately familiar to you. Furthermore, the audience may not know much about the topic—or care. They may hold beliefs directly contrary to your own or incompatible with the action you wish them to take.

Therefore, your first step is to determine your audience’s identity. Ask yourself: Who will be affected by action (or inaction) on this issue? Think demographically and geographically. Are there multiple groups who should care about this issue? Where are they located and how might their concerns related to this issue differ? Next, for each concerned group, ask yourself:

- What does my audience know about the issue?
- What assumptions/biases does my audience hold on this issue? Why?
- What reaction and/or action do I hope to achieve from my audience? Anger and outrage? Thoughtful consideration? Sympathy or concern? (T. May)

Your answers to these questions will determine everything that follows in your argument: tone, style, framing of the problem, outline of the argument, possible solutions offered.

**T O N E / S T Y L E**

You have several objectives in choosing the appropriate tone and style for your op-ed. On the one hand, you want to be authoritative: you need to convince the reader that you are knowledgeable about this issue—an expert. If you are confident that you have thoroughly examined this issue, this confidence will come through in your prose. Be assertive. Use active nouns and active verbs. State the facts in clear, direct terms.
On the other hand, you don’t wish to come across as too bossy or a know-it-all. Portray yourself as someone who cares in a personal way about this issue—just like the reader—someone who shares their sensibility and concerns. Avoid jargon. Avoid stating assumptions about the reader that betray arrogance or condescension. Try to sound familiar without being too folksy or casual. These calculations should be made with your specific readership in mind: the Wall Street Journal will require one kind of tone, Ann Arbor.com another.

STRUCTURE AND STRATEGY
Above all, your purpose is to convince your reader to feel and/or think the same way you do on this issue—to agree with your analysis and support your recommended action. You therefore have three essential tasks:

1. Convince the reader to care/take an interest.
2. Convince the reader to agree with your analysis.
3. Convince the reader that action can be taken on this issue to good effect.

1. Convince the Reader to Take an Interest: The Introduction
Op-ed introductions generally attempt to do two things: generate the reader’s interest in and concern for the issue. To capture the reader’s attention and generate interest, consider one of the following opening strategies:

- Describe the problem in stark terms, conveying the urgency of the issue
- Define the terms of the argument—what is this issue really about?
- Use an evocative image or anecdote
- Use a quotation from an eminent authority, or from someone close to the issue (T. May)

If your issue is one not generally understood by your audience, you will need to follow this opening paragraph with a short discussion of the facts—what is the problem, where did it originate, what is being done, to ensure that their attention is not lost due to confusion or alienation.

2. Convince the Reader to Agree: The Argument
A reader’s beliefs are informed by a specific political context as well as more abstract ethical, emotional, and personal concerns. Your argument therefore should appeal to the reader’s sense of ethical decency while situating the argument in the larger political context. Connect this issue to the reader’s notions of universal values such as justice, equality, freedom, or peace by showing them how the current situation harms the well-being of others. If there are apparent conflicting values (e.g., security vs. justice), explain why one value, in this context, is more essential than the other, and/or how certain advocates have incorrectly asserted the relationship between action and values. For example, you could argue that proponents of waterboarding are correct to be concerned about national security but incorrect in their assertion that torture improves rather than diminishes this value. Or, from the opposing point of view, you could
argue that opponents of waterboarding are correct to be concerned with justice but incorrect to argue that shying away from harsh interrogation techniques will serve the interest of the greater good.

All such claims will require substantiation to be convincing. You should employ either emotional appeals or rational appeals, or both, to substantiate your argument.

**Rational appeals** are useful because they convey a sense of thoughtfulness, objectivity, and authority. Rational appeals back up assertions with data and statistics that illustrate the enormity of a situation or the effect on a population of poor policy decisions. How many people have been displaced, or killed, or harmed? For how many years? In what locations? From this available evidence, the rational appeal draws reasonable, logical conclusions.

However, our beliefs are not informed wholly by statistical or logical analysis. **Emotional appeals** offer other forms of substantiation, more personal, such as anecdotes, quotations from authorities, or appeals from victims. Emotional appeals rely on feelings and inclinations, they make use of emotionally charged labels; explicit and implied analogies as proof; and sensory-based vocabulary (J. Bowman). Keep in mind that such appeals to emotion must be used carefully: they may very well alienate some readers, but could provoke others to care about this issue in a way they might not otherwise.

**3. Convince the Reader that Action can be Taken: The Recommendations**

All writing is political writing. In other words, any argument or statement you make has political causes and political consequences: it has some bearing on how we relate to one another and how we govern ourselves. Your op-ed must be aware of the political situation in which your issue exists and the political obstacles that confront your recommended action on this issue. What compromises are you willing to make? What compromises would be unsatisfactory? If there are specific actions the reader can take, explain.

**Conclusion**

A conclusion should not merely repeat points made previously. Rather, your conclusion should “serve as the impetus for your audience to rethink a problem or motivate them to future action” (T. May). Speculate on what the future may hold should this issue not be given the attention it deserves. Quote from an authoritative or eminent source. Leave the reader with a lasting analogy, metaphor, or image. Indulge in a bit of rhetoric.