



# WRITING THE LIBERTARIAN OP-ED

HOW TO CREATE AN EFFECTIVE  
OP-ED PIECE OR LETTER TO THE  
EDITOR -- *AND GET IT PUBLISHED*

by Thomas L. Knapp

**WRITING THE LIBERTARIAN OP-ED**

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## INTRODUCTION

For many Libertarians -- maybe even most Libertarians -- newspapers are “the enemy.” There are reasons for that. Good reasons.

- In partisan electoral races, Libertarian candidates receive proportionally less newspaper coverage than their vote totals merit. While many publishers and journalists will say that their coverage of “third parties” is driven by polling, the opposite seems to be true.
- When a Libertarian candidate *is* mentioned, it is usually either as an “also ran,” relegated to one sentence at the bottom of a long story on the “major party” candidates, or in a “sideshow” article that depicts the candidate as an eccentric who has no chance of winning, but who is interesting in much the same way as the more bizarre residents of the local zoo.
- When the Libertarian position on an issue is discussed, it is often cited as evidence that Libertarians misunderstand, or ignore, the proper role of government -- with that role left as a stated or unstated assumption not open to question or debate.

Now that I’ve aired those complaints and acknowledged their validity, I’d like to persuade you that newspapers do not *have* to be “the enemy.” I’d also like to convince you that it is in Libertarians’ best interests not to regard them as such.

According to the [Newspaper Association of America](#), there are nearly 1,500 daily, and more than 7,600 weekly, newspapers in the United States. The weekly papers have an average circulation of nearly 6,000, reaching 70 million people each week, with the dailies reaching 55 million on a daily basis and nearly 60 million on Sundays.

That’s a big audience, and one that Libertarians cannot afford to ignore.

It’s also an audience that Libertarians *can reach*.

Every daily newspaper worth its salt has an “editorial” or “opinion” page or section (some of them also refer to it as the “analysis” section). While part of that section is likely devoted to the opinions of the paper’s editorial board, and

another part to publishing the work of syndicated or in-house columnists, the real attraction is the section devoted to readers' letters (and, in some cases, to longer columns solicited from the public at large).

The NAA's statistics don't break out this section in their analysis of readership, but it's a fair bet that for most papers, the opinion section is a popular attraction. And it's dead certain that that section is monitored by those readers who are politically involved, interested in public policy and open to new ideas.

Libertarians can reach that audience. *You* can reach that audience. In this booklet, I'm going to show you how.

I've written more than 100 "op-ed" (opinion-editorial) pieces over the last two decades (probably *considerably* more than 100 -- until computers came along, I didn't keep track). Most of those pieces have been published, sometimes as "letters to the editor" and sometimes in longer format as columns. I've sat, as a community representative, on the editorial board of a daily paper with a circulation of 60,000. Doing so allowed me to get some perspective on the attitudes and needs of the people who put such publications together.

I'm not special. There's no good reason why you can't reach the audience of your city's daily newspaper, putting Libertarian ideas in front of readers frequently and in a credible manner. All you have to do is follow a few simple rules and acquaint yourself with one little secret. I'm going to give you that secret now:

*Newspapers and journalists are not the enemy.*

Really. They aren't.

The people who put together a newspaper may have political convictions. Those convictions may differ from yours or mine. Usually, however, you'll find that one of those convictions is that the newspaper's opinion section exists for the purpose of creating a public forum, a debate space, a place for ideas to clash and for readers to gain new insights into the issues of the day.

The opinion page editor doesn't want to produce a homogenous product reflecting only his views, or the views of the paper's editorial board. He wants conflict. He wants to present opposing views that inspire a reaction from the audience. Part of that may be simple business sense -- who would want to read the same old opinions, day after day? -- but mostly it's a matter of principle. That's what an opinion page is *for*.

When an opinion page editor finds a piece on his desk that is well-written and

well-reasoned, he's going to publish it even if it is controversial. Scratch that: *especially* if it is controversial. He doesn't have to agree with you. It's enough for him that his readers are going to find the piece engaging; that they're going to love or hate it; that they're going to *think about it* and *react to it*.

The opinion page editor isn't your enemy. He may be your best friend. If you let him, he'll put your opinion in front of thousands of people, substantially unedited and as often as anyone else's.

And that's what you want. Right?

Now let's get into how you can make that happen

Yours in liberty,  
Thomas L. Knapp

## SIX RULES FOR WRITING THE OP-ED

Writing an effective letter to the editor or opinion column isn't as complicated as you might think. I've tried to boil it down to six simple rules that cover it all. These rules may seem obvious. If that's the case, then you're probably already well down the road toward getting your work published.

If they don't seem obvious, give them careful consideration. They *do* matter. Given two pieces, one of them written to the specifications I set out, and one not, the editor of your local paper's opinion page is going to publish the former piece 99 times out of 100. Getting your work published on the opinion page is a competitive process, not just of ideas but of *quality*. The editor has limited space, limited time and limited patience. Poorly written or meandering material doesn't make the grade.

- I. KNOW YOUR NEWSPAPER
- II. HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY
- III. GET YOUR FACTS STRAIGHT
- IV. GET TO THE POINT
- V. PRACTICE PARSIMONY
- VI. WRITE WELL

Pretty simple, eh? The devil, as always, is in the details, or this booklet would be over. These six rules, however, cover the bases. If you're willing to master and apply them, your fellow Americans will soon be reading what you write.

### I. KNOW YOUR NEWSPAPER

No two newspapers are exactly alike. Your local daily has probably been around for years. Over time, its editors have developed rules that govern how they work.

They know, for example, that they want to publish at least *this* many, and no more than *that* many letters in each daily edition, and from this they will have developed guidelines for maximum letter length.

They know, from experience, how often they can publish letters or columns by a single author without generating complaints -- or, worse, ceasing to generate reader interest. Their guidelines, published or unpublished, will set a limit on how frequently you can submit a piece and hope to see it in print.

These guidelines are generally *not* flexible. An editor who wishes to preserve his reputation will not bend them. Doing so would call into question his objectivity and willingness to make the opinion page a forum for competing ideas rather than a pulpit for one perspective.

The guidelines are usually printed on the opinion page itself, or in the publication's masthead (usually located on the second page of the first section). They'll read something like this:

*Readers are invited to submit letters to the editor on any subject, with a maximum length of 250 words. No more than two letters from a single author will be published in any given month.*

Read those guidelines. Learn them. Live them. If you constantly send in letters or articles that don't adhere to the guidelines, the editor will quickly learn to move them to the bottom of the pile for consideration only if nothing else is interesting. Or, possibly, to just throw them in the trash immediately.

If you expect to write for a newspaper, you should first and foremost *read* that newspaper. Not just occasionally. Not just when the edition with the coupons come out. Daily, or nearly every day. Papers have *character*. To the extent that their news coverage or editorial opinions display any bias, that bias is likely to be fairly consistent -- if not throughout the paper, at least on a regular basis in the work of any given author.

If the newspaper has endorsed the passage of Proposition X for six months, the opinion editor isn't likely to place much stock in a letter beginning "I was shocked to read of your paper's endorsement of Proposition X last week ..."

And why should he? He's absolutely certain that his newspaper is the best source of information available in your community. You haven't read it for the last six months, but you expect him to provide you with a soapbox to yell 250 words from, before stalking out the door for another six months?

This is a rule that can occasionally be bent. Recently, a newspaper in my state, but not in my locale, ran a column on third party candidates and the media coverage they get versus the media coverage they deserve. I responded with a column of my own -- written to the specified guidelines -- and it was published.

The exception, however, proves the rule. I did not write a letter about a local bond issue or the merits of the city's public school system. The original column addressed a larger issue, just as germane in my community as theirs, and so did my response. I also included a brief precis of my qualifications to speak to the issue.

If you're going to write for a paper that you don't frequently read, take special care. Follow its guidelines to the letter and make sure you aren't addressing an issue you don't know enough about or flaunting a lack of knowledge about the "local angle."

## II. HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY

The Internet has made people lazy. If you subscribe to many email "discussion lists," you know what I'm talking about. One person makes a point, and fifty people chime in with "I agree."

If the editorial material in your local paper reflects your view on an issue, and if it does so well, offering compelling argument buttressed by irrefutable fact, there's no reason to blaze out a one-paragraph "I agree" letter. Nobody cares if you agree (unless you're a person of public prominence who might be expected *not* to agree).

If the editorial material in your local paper *doesn't* reflect your view on an issue, "I disagree" isn't good enough. You have to have, and be able to cogently express, your *reasons* for disagreeing. The opinion page is a forum, not a polling place. Your agreement or disagreement is irrelevant except to the extent that you offer an argument designed to persuade others that you're right.

*You have to have something to say*, and it can't just be the same thing that everyone else is saying. The editor is looking for novel arguments, for new facts and for perspectives that haven't yet been given voice in his newspaper. Those things are what make the opinion page interesting to his readers.

When you sit down to write your letter or column, start with a list of the points you want to make. Then whittle that list down. The odds are good that some of those points have already been covered multiple times. Eliminate them or, at the very most, give them passing reference. Concentrate on what is *unique* in your point of view, or at least on what you haven't yet seen thoroughly discussed on the opinion page.

Of course, this rule emphasizes one of your strengths. As a Libertarian, you're used to seeing your perspective go unnoticed in the press. That's why you're

interested in writing an op-ed in the first place, right? If your paper's opinion page confined itself to reprinting Libertarian Party's press releases, you'd be out at a party instead of in front of your computer working on a letter to the editor.

American politics is a "target rich environment" for the Libertarian op-ed writer. On almost every issue, we offer different solutions than the "mainstream" politicians and pundits. Offer them, then -- that's the whole idea.

### **III. GET YOUR FACTS STRAIGHT**

Guidelines being what they are, you may not have room in print to substantiate every factual claim you make. Don't let this be a temptation to laziness.

If you claim that 29% of dog owners suffer from fibromyalgia, you'd better be ready to point to an authoritative source -- the Journal of the American Medical Association, for example -- that supports that claim (no, I don't have any idea if it's true or not -- and don't cite this booklet as your source if you claim it is).

Editors will likely check questionable claims of fact -- and even if you sneak one past them, there are, hopefully, thousands of readers, some of whom will know better or who will check up on those claims. The truth will out, and if you get lazy or just make things up, you *will* get caught. Your views will be discredited, and it's very possible that you won't have another opportunity to see those views in print in that paper.

I've received phone calls from newspapers asking for my sources when I've made claims that are at odds with the conventional wisdom, especially when I've written on drug prohibition issues.

If you make a claim that is in any way controversial, make sure you have your sources at hand. Better yet, include them with your letter or op-ed, at the bottom and not as part of the body of the article (we'll be getting to formatting a little later). This will make your editor's job easier and increase the possibility of getting your piece published.

### **IV. GET TO THE POINT**

An op-ed or letter to the editor isn't a journal entry, a memoir or a wistful reflection on the vicissitudes of life. It has a purpose. It has a topic. Focus relentlessly on that topic. Nothing else matters.

If you're writing in opposition to a local bond issue for the public school system, how much you enjoyed attending a rural junior high isn't relevant or interesting.

If you're writing in support of a proposal to lift your state's ban on carrying concealed firearms, there's no reason to carry on about the thrill of your first deer hunt.

You've got a point to make. Make it. Demonstrate that your position on the issue is the correct one and that your opponents are incorrect. Tell the reader *why* you're right and they're wrong. Prove it with facts that support your position.

Dispose of the obvious arguments, or the arguments you've seen in the newspaper, against your position. You have some leeway in doing so, to the extent that indicting your opponents' motives may be effective. That doesn't mean you have to get personal. Unless you're demanding that a legislator be recalled for moral turpitude, his extramarital affairs are irrelevant. You don't have the space, and the reader doesn't have the attention span, for your piece to include them.

If you believe that State Representative Smith supports a state suit against the tobacco companies because his law firm has been hired by the Attorney General's office to aid in the suit, say it -- *if the piece is about the tobacco suit*, or about State Representative Smith's conflicts of interest. If the piece is about Smith's opposition to same-sex marriage, leave it out. You have other, more important, things to say, and a limited number of words with which to say them.

## V. PRACTICE PARSIMONY

**par si mo ny**, *n.* Unusual or excessive frugality; extreme economy or stinginess.

*(The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, Copyright c 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company.)*

Remember those guidelines? Unless you're the Unabomber, you don't get to ramble on at book length in your local paper's editorial section. You have to accomplish your mission *tightly*, using the minimum number of words to make your point well.

Over time, I've developed a method that works well for me. It may or not work for you. If it doesn't, find some other way to "tighten up" your articles so that they make the most effective argument in the least amount of space.

As I mentioned in discussing Rule Number Two ("Have Something to Say"), I generally begin a piece by listing the points I want to make, then either

eliminating, or choosing to only briefly discuss, the ones that have already been covered in the newspaper or that are less important.

After I've done this, I write the article without thinking too much about how many words I'm using. I remain focused on the topic and avoid tossing in extraneous material, but I say what I want to say.

Then I ask my word processor how long the "complete" article is.

Nine times out of ten, it's too long. I have, for example, 400 words to speak my piece. I've written 800 words. Half of them have to go. Well, writing is re-writing, or so the professionals tell us.

On my second run through the article, I take it sentence by sentence, trying to find more economic ways to express my thoughts. Most rough drafts include sentences with extra, unnecessary clauses. I cut them. There are likely repetitions of the same point, differently expressed. I pick the best one and delete the others. I see places where I used two words when one would do just as well. One it is, then.

The completed second draft is much smaller, but usually not small enough. It's still 500-600 words in length. I'm not Ernest Hemingway or the President of the United States, so the editor is probably not going to bend the rules for me. *I have to get it down to 400 words.*

That second draft served a function other than mere size-cutting. By deleting repetitious entries, I've given the piece more structure. Each paragraph probably covers a distinct point. It's time to go back to whittling down the number of points the article covers.

What? You say that everything in the article is necessary? That unless you can make all five of those important points, it just doesn't work?

*Make it work.* It may be less than perfect when you're done, but it will be published. The long version won't be. This isn't Burger King™ -- you don't get it your way.

My third run through consists of throwing the less essential points overboard, usually by cutting whole paragraphs. It's ugly and hurtful. I hate to do it. I do it anyway. This piece isn't being written to my guidelines, it's being written to the newspaper's guidelines. The point of writing it isn't to build my ego, it's to persuade others to adopt my views. If it isn't published, it will persuade nobody. When it comes to ego, however, there is also a good reason to practice

parsimony. If you submit your article to a newspaper as is, at 500 words versus the 400 specified in the newspaper's guidelines, it *may* still be published. In those guidelines, you'll likely have noted that the editor "reserves the right to edit for length."

You can cut it down to 400 words. Or the editor can cut it down to 400 words. Who do you trust to know your thoughts and priorities better? Yourself or that editor? Do you want the piece to reflect your priorities, or his?

Cut it until it bleeds. *Someone* is going to.

## VI. WRITE WELL

Does that go without saying? No, it doesn't. I'm an editor myself and a large portion of the mail I receive is poorly written, riddled with misspellings and tortured grammar and incoherent.

The first five rules cover *parts* of writing well, but it deserves its own section.

If the editor can't understand the point you're trying to make, his readers won't be able to either. It's unlikely that he'll print your letter or op-ed; if he does, it's unlikely that anyone will find it informative or persuasive.

Proofreading is part of editing. It's the part that editors like least. If every other word in your article is misspelled, the piece will probably go unpublished. If *you* can't be bothered to run it through your word processor's "spelling check" function, what makes you think *he* can be?

The best writing may be as much art as science. You don't have to be the best writer to get your work published. You don't have to be an undiscovered Stephen King or Robert Heinlein. You just have to be competent, and that is something that lies within your grasp.

If you're unsure about the quality of your writing, do something about it. Pick up Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. It's a short book. The authors practiced parsimony in putting it together. A few hours spent curled up with *The Elements of Style* will turn any literate reader into a competent writer. If you'd like to take it further, Stephen King's *On Writing* is a marvelous guide, and not just for those who aspire to write fiction. King's early writing experience included covering sports for his local paper as a high school student.

Above and beyond the mechanics covered in the aforementioned books, there are two important factors in becoming a competent writer:

- *Write.* You don't have to submit everything that you write for publication. Do basketball players refrain from touching the ball until game time? Keep a journal. Participate in email discussion lists. Start that novel. It's a skill that improves with practice.
- *Read.* If you like something you read, chances are that others will like it too. Don't plagiarize, of course, but take note of the things you like *about* the material you read and incorporate those techniques into your own writing.

The elements of a good op-ed are simple: It's written to the publication's guidelines. The author has something to say, and makes his point. The factual claims are true and the author's case is persuasive. It's coherent and readable.

You can create well-crafted op-ed pieces. You can get them published. You can be effective in persuading others. It takes a little effort, but it isn't rocket science. So make it happen.

## FORMATTING

The Internet has revolutionized the process of submitting op-ed pieces for publication. At one time, getting your letter published meant writing it by hand or on a typewriter, stuffing it in an envelope and mailing it. Some newspapers had phone lines that allowed readers to record their opinion, but the effective op-ed creator still wrote it, even if he then read it into a telephone.

Your piece will most likely be composed using a computer and a word processing application. If that's the case, it's fairly simple. Remember Rule Number One ("Know Your Newspaper"). Check their guidelines for submission. Most papers prefer that articles be sent in the body of an email message as plain ASCII text. If you send them an attached file in a proprietary word processor format, they may look at it. Or they may not.

I compose my op-eds in Microsoft Works, Microsoft Word, or OpenOffice. This allows me to avail myself of things like word counting tools, spelling check utilities and so forth.

When the piece is completed, however, I paste the entire text into an ASCII text editor like Notepad, which comes with all Microsoft Windows systems. This eliminates all "special" characters, or at least highlights them so that I can eliminate them myself. Many word processors produce output that is full of "garbage" characters if pasted directly into an email.

If the article is an op-ed, I open the email message with a brief note to the editor, identifying the topic of the piece and respectfully asking that he have a look at it. I paste the article in below my signature. If the article is a letter to the editor, I omit the opening note. At the bottom of the article, I insert the text:

-30-

That's newspaperese for "the end." Immediately below that, I note the length of the article, my name, address, daytime telephone number and email, like so:

-30-

about 400 words

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If you're submitting the article by snail mail, format it in a 12-point, normal-looking font and "double space" it, i.e. leave a line between each line of text. Print it on decent paper and at a nice, readable resolution.

If you print the thing on your kids' left-over purple construction paper, at 72 dots per inch with an old dot matrix unit that has a worn ribbon, don't bother to keep the phone lines clear awaiting the editor's call.

In formatting, as with everything else, remember that the opinion page editor isn't your enemy. He *wants* to publish quality opinion pieces. Make it easy for him to publish yours.

-30-

about 4210 words

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**Thomas L. Knapp** is a Libertarian activist and writer. He publishes [Rational Review](#), a webzine of libertarian commentary, and formerly an editor of [Free-Market.Net](#), the Internet's most comprehensive libertarian web site. He lives in St. Louis, Missouri, with his partner, Tamara Millay, and their children.