WRITING AN EFFECTIVE OP-ED ARTICLE

Do you have an interesting opinion to share? If you do, an op-ed article is the best way to express your opinion or thoughts about an issue. Additionally, if you can express yourself clearly and persuasively in an op-ed article, you may reach millions of people, sway hearts, change minds and perhaps even reshape public policy. In the process, you may also earn recognition for yourself and NARFE.

Following are guidelines for writing an effective op-ed article:

- **Limit the article to 750 words**
  Shorter is better. Unfortunately, newspapers have limited space to offer, and editors generally won’t take the time to cut a long article down to size.

- **Make a single point — well**
  You cannot solve all the world’s problems in 750 words. Be satisfied with making a single point clearly and persuasively. If you cannot explain your message in a sentence or two, you’re trying to cover too much.

- **Put your main point on top**
  You have no more than 10 seconds to hook a busy reader; just get to the point and convince the reader that it’s worth his or her valuable time to continue reading.

- **Tell readers why they should care**
  Put yourself in the place of the busy person looking at your article and yourself what you would like that reader to walk away with after reading your article. Answer the following questions: will the reader understand the issue being raised? Will they sympathize with me or support my views? Will the article help them understand the importance of addressing the issue? Chances are the reader would make a connection to a family friend or member who at some point worked for the government.

- **Offer specific recommendations**
  An op-ed is not a news story that simply describes a situation; it is your opinion about how to improve matters. In an op-ed article you need to offer recommendations. Offer how Congress should fix act to fix a policy or to enact laws to protect the federal community.

- **Embrace your personal voice**
  Writing about your own experience is the best way to influence a reader or persuade a public official. When readers understand how your life is impacted by threats to your earned benefits and health security, they will then make a connection to how the entire federal community is impacted.

- **Don’t worry about the headline.**
  The newspaper will write its own headline. You can suggest one, but don’t spend a lot of time worrying about it.

- **Use short sentences and paragraphs**
  Look at some op-ed articles and count the number of words per sentence. You’ll probably

For more information, please contact NARFE’s advocacy department at advocacy@narfe.org.
find the sentences to be quite short. You should use the same style, relying mainly on simple declarative sentences. Cut long paragraphs into two or more shorter ones.

- **How to submit an article**
  Almost all newspapers and commentary sites now post guidelines about how they prefer to receive op-ed submissions. In general, they provide an e-mail address where you can submit the article electronically but check first. Always be sure to include your contact information and say whether you have a photo of yourself available.

- **Where to submit the article**
  You have a better shot at submitting your article to regional newspapers and, especially, at papers serving your own community since national newspapers like the New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal get a staggering number of articles weekly.

**WRITING AN EFFECTIVE LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

Do you feel strongly about an issue and want to let people know what you think? Do you want to influence people to take action? Do you want to reach a larger audience outside NARFE’s community? Letters to the editor can be an effective way to do just that.

A letter to the editor is a written way of talking to a newspaper, magazine, or other regularly printed publication. They can take a position for or against an issue, or simply inform, or both. They can convince readers by using emotions, or facts, or emotions and facts combined. Letters to the editor are usually short and tight, rarely longer than 300 words.

Using a few carefully placed letters, you can generate plenty of community discussion. You can also keep an issue going by preventing it from disappearing from the public eye. You can stimulate the interest of the news media and create more coverage for the matters you’re working on. You can also send a "good news" letter to bring recognition to people who deserve it or to acknowledge the success of an effort.

- **Invite others in join you**
  You do not have to be the only one to write the letter: letters are often published with multiple signers. You also don’t have to be the only one to write a letter. Several people may write letters on the same topic with the same or slightly different points, and submit them a few days apart, so that the issue stays on the Letters page for a period.

- **Open the letter with a simple salutation**
  Don't worry if you don't know the editor's name. A simple "To the Editor of the Daily Sun," or just “To the Editor:” is sufficient. If you have the editor’s name, however, you should use it to increase the possibilities of your letter being read.

- **Grab the reader’s attention**
  Your opening sentence is very important. It should tell readers what you’re writing about and make them want to read more.

- **Explain why the issue is important**
  If you are motivated enough to write a letter to a newspaper or magazine, the importance of
your topic may seem clear to you. Remember, though, that the general public probably
doesn't share your background or the interest. Explain the issue and its importance simply.
Use plain language that most people will understand

- **State your opinion about what should be done**
  You can write a letter just to "vent," or to support or criticize a certain action or policy, but
  you may also have suggestions about what could be done to improve the situation. If so, be
  sure to add these as well. Be specific. And the more good reasons you can give to back up
  your suggestions, the better.

- **Keep it brief**
  Generally, shorter letters have a better chance of being published. So, go back over your
  letter and see if anything can be cut or condensed. If you have a lot to say and it can't be
  easily made short, you may want to check with the editor to see if you could write a longer
  opinion feature or guest column.

- **Sign the letter**
  Be sure to write your full name and to include your address, phone number, and e-mail
  address. Newspapers won't print anonymous letters, though in some cases they may
  withhold your name on request. They may also call you to confirm that you wrote the letter
  before they publish it.

- **Proofread your letter for errors and clarity**
  A newspaper may not print every letter it receives, but clear, well-written letters are likely to
  be given more serious consideration.

- **How do you get your letter accepted?**
  How likely your letter is to be published depends to a certain extent on the publication
  you're sending it to. The New York Times probably receives hundreds, if not thousands of
  letters a day, only ten or so of which make it into print. A small-town newspaper, on the
  other hand, may print every letter it gets, since it may get only two or three a day.

- **Use local statistics and personal stories in the federal community to better
  illustrate your point.**
  Access NARFE’s Federal Family Fact Sheets for state specific statistics on the federal
  community to include in your letter.

- **Include your contact information**
  Adding your name and contact information adds credibility to your article and advocacy.
  Also, editors may want to contact you, so include your phone number and e-mail address.

- **Try again**
  If your letter is not accepted the first time around, try again. You might submit a revised
  version with a different angle on the issue later.