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HEALing Communities Study

Play 3: How-to Pitch, Place and Leverage Op-Eds, Letters to the Editor, and Alternative Digital Content

Get Started

» WHAT?

This playbook is a resource to use in **planning, conceptualizing, drafting, revising, and submitting print and digital content to the media**. This content can be used to draw attention to your work and explain why and how this work is significant.

The playbook specifically addresses the following three communication activities:

- **Opinion editorials (op-eds)**. Written pieces of around 500 to 750 words that represent the author's opinion (individual or collective) on a timely issue of relevance. Op-eds often appear in newspapers, but people also write op-eds to post on websites (both news and general interest sites) and social media platforms like LinkedIn.
- **Letters to the editor (LTEs)**. A letter of 300 words or less that shares why the letter's author supports, contradicts, or is disengaged from a topic that has been published in a print publication (e.g., newspaper, magazine, etc.). LTEs can elevate information that may not be addressed in a news article and are often read by elected officials. LTEs are generally located at the beginning of a publication or on the editorial page. In general, content used for an op-ed can be repurposed for a LTE or vice versa. The main differences between an op-ed and LTE is the word length and formatting (letter vs. article).
- **Alternative digital content (ADCs)**. Other content like blog posts written for digital outlets (e.g., Medium, Blogger, Reddit) and social media articles (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook). ADCs reach people through reposts, shares, and saves and can have a longer-lasting impact and relevance to the target audience. Unlike op-eds and LTEs, the format requirements of these pieces vary based on the platform and the specific audience the author wants to address.

» WHO?

You may or may not be the author for a piece you want to publish. An author or writer can be any individual or organization in the community with a concise, timely, evocative, and/or well-reasoned perspective on a current event.

» WHEN?

Consider developing and submitting any of the aforementioned pieces when subject matter (e.g., person, place, cause, or event) pertaining to opioid overdose fatalities or opioid overdose prevention is receiving heightened local media coverage.

If an op-ed or LTE is not accepted for publication, an author can still leverage the content used within them for an ADC.

» WHY?

All of these pieces can help draw attention to preventing opioid overdoses in the community.

People who read op-eds are interested in important community issues. These people include elected officials, other community leaders, and local residents who are engaged in community action. You want to bring what can be done to prevent and reduce opioid overdose deaths to their attention.

» HOW?

Complete Steps 1, 2, and 3 described below.

This includes identifying a topic to write about, an author, and strategies for aligning the piece with the most appropriate publisher.

Be sure to review the tools and writing tips as you conceptualize, draft, revise, and submit print and digital content.

STEP 1: PLAN

- Identify the piece's desired reader, what they care about, and what might motivate them to engage in local, opioid overdose prevention efforts.
- Identify and make a list of potential publications for reaching desired readers.

BEFORE WRITING, KNOW WHO THE AUTHOR IS TRYING TO INFLUENCE:

Choose the ideal publication based on the audience you want to reach or influence. As you consider pieces and topics, reflect on how these relate to the publication's target readership.

WHEN CONSIDERING THE AUDIENCE, REFLECT ON THE FOLLOWING CHARACTERISTICS OF A PUBLICATION'S READERSHIP:

- Pre-existing knowledge of opioids, naloxone, medicines to treat opioid addiction, and stigma;
- Age;
- Educational background; and
- Experience with opioid-related problems (such as business owners, leaders of religious groups, and people in recovery and their families).

To understand a publication's readership demographics, consider using the information collected in the media gatekeeper interviews to identify local outlets and identify where best to pitch the content. Consider your desired audience to help inform which publication to choose. Many pieces and websites tailor their content to specific groups of people and look for content they believe these groups will find interesting, moving, or thought-provoking.

If the results of the media gatekeeper interviews lack the information you need, review the target publication's website or social media channels and view their About or

mission statement sections. If that information is not explicitly stated or suggested by their content, consider contacting the publication staff. Contact information should be available on the platform's website or on a printed document (magazine, newspaper, etc.).

WHEN CONTACTING THE PUBLICATION, DO THE FOLLOWING:

1. Make an introduction.
2. State the purpose of contacting them (e.g., interested in contributing to the publication as a contributing author via an op-ed, blog post, article, etc.).
3. State the request (e.g., say you want information about the publication's readership to tailor the article's content).
4. Ask if they can provide that information or know someone at the organization who you can reach out to directly to obtain that information.
5. Provide contact information (email, social media handle, and contact number).
6. Express gratitude for their time and consideration.

HOW-TO IDENTIFY A PUBLICATION'S REQUIREMENTS

After narrowing down the audience and preferred publication, find out the publication's guest editorial policy. Editorial requirements can be found by visiting the publishers' website or contacting an editor at their email address.

In particular, you will want to understand

- What characteristics the publication values,
- Word count limitations,
- Formatting requirements,
- Graphic requirements, and
- Multimedia options (video, audio, etc.).



YOUR TURN! START AN OUTLINE

Keeping the desired reader in mind, ask the following questions while drafting the op-ed, LTE, or ADC outline. If you are not the author, it may be helpful to have a preliminary outline ready to share and discuss with a potential author or share the questions provided here for the author to consider.

- What will make readers care enough about the problem or opinion to read the entire piece?
- Why is it important that the reader understand the perspective presented?
- What are the arguments or evidence that the reader will find compelling?
- What tactics will help the reader understand and respect piece's point-of-view?

STEP 2: IDENTIFY AN AUTHOR

- Identify characteristics needed by the author.
- Expand on the list of publications by identifying potential authors and topics for them to address.

Once you have identified your target audience and publication, you are now ready to find an author, if you have decided not to take this role yourself. Use the tips below to help you identify an appropriate, persuasive author who will help give a compelling voice to your efforts. This will also help you determine if you are the best author to accomplish your goals

NOTORIETY: HOW CONNECTED IS THE AUTHOR TO THE SUBJECT?

The op-ed, LTE, and/or ADC author can make or break the likelihood the content will be published and the responsiveness of readers to the overall argument. An editor is more likely to publish a piece from an author who is connected to the topic by their professional background or current job or by someone who knows about the topic through their lived experience.

RECOGNITION: HOW WELL-KNOWN IS THE AUTHOR?

An author's credentials can be impactful in establishing credibility (e.g., Dr., PhD, Director, CEO, etc.). Although it is not essential that the piece be written by a locally or nationally prominent figure, public prominence can help attract reader attention.

SKILLSET: HOW EFFECTIVELY CAN THE AUTHOR WRITE?

Whether you can find a prominent author or not, the author should be someone that can write persuasively and clearly and appeal to the logic and emotions of the publication's audience.

STEP 3: IMPLEMENT

- Review and revise the draft, especially the title and first paragraph, to ensure it is “newsworthy” and compelling.

- Review tools and tips for writing an effective op-ed, LTE, or ADC.
- Understand how to review, pitch, and place a piece.

START WRITING

Depending on the word count limitations of your selected publication (identified in Step 2), focusing on the argument without veering off into a tangent is critical. The first sentence should begin the argument clearly and grab the reader’s attention. This is often referred to as a hook.

What makes information newsworthy?

Consider what makes information newsworthy to potential editors and readers:

1. **Impact:** How an issue impacts a person or community on a large scale, whether speaking to the benefits of taking action or to the consequences of inaction.
2. **Timeliness:** Speaks to current news that is “new,” like a new initiative, effort, law, partnership, or data.
3. **Prominence:** Issue involves a well-known person, place, or event.
4. **Proximity:** Issue affects people in the local community and region—the people “close to home”; people may find the issue more relevant if it affects their own community.
5. **Human Interest:** Draws an emotional reaction by speaking to the human condition and provides a more intimate snapshot on the beliefs and actions of a person or group.
6. **Conflict:** Speaks to consequences that may directly affect readers and addresses conflicting beliefs and behaviors by highlighting problems or differences within the community.
7. **The Bizarre:** Unusual or unlikely events often catch people's interest.
8. **Currency:** Related to a story trending in the public spotlight or an idea that has become popular because of seasonality.

USE THESE TOOLS TO INFORM YOUR DRAFT

The three tools offered below can help you write your op-ed or LTE. Remember, the formatting of ADCs will depend on the publication requirements (social media, print, etc.) of your chosen publication (e.g., social media, magazine, blog, etc.).

KEEP WRITING

Remember, perfection can be the enemy of progress. Once you have a first draft, review and refine it. Read it out loud to find places you can clarify and strengthen the argument further.

As you revise, look for opportunities to

- Replace jargon and explain acronyms.
- Be concise—lose the fluff and maximize limited word count by minimizing adjectives (e.g., quick, fast, patient) and adverbs (e.g., -ly).
- Write in active voice (e.g., allow the subject to perform the action directly).

Ex: Passive Voice: *The plate was moved by Robert.*

Active Voice: *Robert moved the plate.*

[TOOL 1] OP-ED TEMPLATE

Word Count: 500–750 words (Depends on Publication)

OUTLINE	ELEMENTS
Introduction (1 Paragraph)	<p>Opener: Captures the reader’s attention (e.g., quote, anecdote, statistic).</p> <p>Tactics for an engaging opener:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use startling or eye-opening facts• Ask intriguing questions• Explore common myths• Present new information on the subject—use the most recent scientific/sociological data• Use slice-of-life examples or interesting comparisons• Use a testimonial <p>Context: Explains the issue; concisely provides background and context.</p> <p>Thesis: Where you tell the reader your stance on the topic.</p> <p>Counter Argument: Addresses the main argument of the opposing side.</p>
Body (2–3 Paragraphs)	<p>Rebuttal: The response of the organization to the opposing side’s argument.</p> <p>Summary: Reminds the reader of the main argument and evidence.</p>
Conclusion (1 paragraph)	<p>Thesis: Reminds the reader what the main argument is and why they should care.</p> <p>Personal Comment, Call to Action, or Question: The thought or action you want to leave in the reader’s mind.</p> <p>Signature</p>

[TOOL 2] OP-ED EXAMPLE

Note: The events depicted in this op-ed are fictitious. Any similarity to any person living or dead is merely coincidental.

March Op-Ed Outline: Intro to HCS '3 Minutes to Innovation'

Author: Health Commissioner Ryan Northington, MD, MPH

Audience: Ohio health care providers

Thesis: Differing opinions are an unavoidable aspect of collaboration but when approached strategically can lead to innovation.

OUTLINE	ELEMENTS		
Introduction	Opener: Captures the reader's attention (e.g., quote, anecdote, statistic).	<p>"Three minutes.</p> <p>The minimum amount of time the brain can be deprived of oxygen during an opioid overdose before death is imminent.</p> <p>I should know as the [Name of City] Health Commissioner, a primary care physician, and a yoga enthusiast.</p> <p>Whether I am reminding myself to breath as I practice relaxation exercises or encouraging my patients with opioid use disorder to carry naloxone, a medication that can reverse opioid overdoses, my purpose lies in promoting life through the breath."</p>	<p>This op-ed begins with an eye-opening fact (source) that unabashedly introduces the reader to the topic/problem: opioid-overdose fatalities.</p> <p>Dr. Northington begins to disclose his identity as the author and his connection to the op-ed topic.</p>

OUTLINE	ELEMENTS		
	<p>Context: Explains the issue; concisely provides background and context.</p>	<p>“From 1999 to 2010, Ohio’s breath was lost to the relentless punch of prescription opioids and the combative kick of overdose deaths as a result.</p> <p>In 2017, Ohio had the second highest rate of drug overdose deaths involving opioids in the country.</p> <p>These statistics have marred the beauty of Ohio and placed an unfair amount of blame and burden on Ohio healthcare providers.</p> <p>Ohio being selected as one of four states to host the unprecedented HEALing Communities Study (HCS) has provided us a much needed opportunity to combat the ravages of the opioid epidemic.</p> <p>Funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), this \$89 million grant intends to reduce opioid overdose deaths by 40% in three years.”</p>	<p>Dr. Northington contextualizes the severity of the opioid epidemic in Ohio by using mortality statistics.</p> <p>Note how the statistics presented tie into the breath language used in the introduction (source).</p> <p>He also introduces the HEALing Communities Study (HCS) and the impact it can have in reversing the opioid epidemic on the state and on reviving the state back to life.</p>
	<p>Thesis: Where you tell the reader your stance on the topic.</p>	<p>“What makes HCS unlike any other initiative?</p> <p>It emphasizes what makes our state and this country successful—a mix of people from different backgrounds, disciplines, and demographics.</p> <p>In collaboration with representatives from academic institutions like The Ohio State University, local coalitions, health institutions, justice facilities and more, HCS promotes life-saving practices that have been proven effective by research rather than opinion.”</p>	<p>Dr. Northington begins to explain how HCS has the potential to reverse the negative impact of the opioid epidemic on the state.</p>

OUTLINE	ELEMENTS		
Body	Counter Argument: Addresses the main argument of the opposing side.	<p>“Like any initiative that brings together an array of individuals and collectives, there will be dissenting opinions and priorities despite being united under a common goal.</p> <p>The same is true of many families, a group of people with whom you share a common bond. While every member brings a number of gifts to your gatherings, you don’t always see eye to eye.</p> <p>I don’t know about you, but I always have a bit of anxiety during the holidays when my family tries to be civil when discussing politics, religion, or finances.</p> <p>Differing opinions are a reality of any collective, and it’s what has and continues to shape this great state and this great country.”</p>	<p>The author outlines how the main challenge of HCS will be competing priorities despite a shared objective (i.e., reduce opioid-overdose fatalities by 40% in three years).</p> <p>He compares differing opinions that can arise interinstitutionally with the different opinions that can arise in families.</p>
	Rebuttal: The response of the organization to the opposing side’s argument.	<p>“However, when different opinions are anticipated and approached in a way that channels their strengths to promote change and innovation, anything is possible.</p> <p>In HCS, participating communities will choose from a menu of research-based strategies for reducing opioid-overdose fatalities settings like</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Criminal justice settings, 2. Syringe service programs, 3. Emergency departments and hospitals, and 4. Addiction treatment facilities, and more.” 	<p>As opposed to presenting a grandiose means for overcoming dissent, Dr. Northington argues that differing opinions are unavoidable and, when faced head on, can be used to compel innovation.</p> <p>He specifically addresses the HCS strategy for strategically focusing and synthesizing divergent priorities: evidence-based practices (EBPs). HCS will also elevate the autonomy of the participating communities who are the most impacted directly by the epidemic.</p>

OUTLINE	ELEMENTS		
Conclusion	Summary: Reminds the reader of the main argument and evidence.	<p>“The collective effort of these organizations to address their respective priorities and unite behind a common goal will be both the challenge and gift of this study.</p> <p>If successful, this unprecedented study will make unprecedented changes that impact the landscape of our state and nation as a whole.”</p>	Dr. Northington synthesizes the rebuttal; differing opinions are unavoidable but when approached strategically (via EBPs), they can lead to large-scale innovation.
	Thesis: Reminds the reader what the main argument is and why they should care	<p>“Three minutes.</p> <p>The minimum amount of time the brain can be deprived of oxygen during an opioid overdose before death is imminent.</p> <p>The unprecedented HCS study is giving Ohio a much needed resuscitation to reduce opioid overdose deaths by 40% in three years.”</p>	Going back to the use of time in the introduction, Dr. Northington re-emphasizes how HCS will reduce opioid related fatalities by 40% in three years—an unprecedented endeavor.
	Personal Comment, Call to Action or Question: The thought or action you want to leave in the reader’s mind.	<p>“How will we use our resuscitation... arguing over our differences or uniting behind a common goal?</p> <p>We all decide.”</p>	<p>The op-ed ends by returning to the language of the breath, used throughout the entire op-ed, to frame a question for the reader to ponder, “How will we use our resuscitation . . .?”</p> <p>The use of the collective pronoun “we” is intended to emphasize how the future of the opioid epidemic is not dependent on one stakeholder but on many.</p>

[TOOL 3] LETTER TO THE EDITOR TEMPLATE

Word Count: No more than 200 words (Depends on Publication).

OUTLINE	ELEMENTS
Heading	Newspaper Name: Newspaper address, fax, or email: Date: Dear editor,
Introduction & Body	Yesterday you reported that. . . This is [timely/interesting/ironic] because. . . As a [parent/teacher/physician/community member/voter], my perspective is. . . What people don't realize is. . . One thing that could really make a difference is. . . Sincerely,
Conclusion	Signature [Your name, address, email, and phone number]

EMBRACE THE PERSONAL

Unlike some academic writing guidelines, op-eds, LTEs, and ADCs allow more freedom to use personal voice through a first-person perspective ("I"). If the op-ed centers on a personal narrative, use language and facts to show the reader the significance of your argument.

COUNTER THE OPPOSITION DIRECTLY

Research and acknowledge counterarguments to the opinion being argued. Refute those arguments with tangible, credible facts.

Consider the following tips when countering naysayers:

- Limit speculation and stick to understandable facts.
- Restrain the counterargument. Remember, wordcounts are limited and the argument should take precedence, so limit the facts you use to three or less.
- Despite the stakes, keep the arguments civil and avoid slanderous or defamatory language.
- Anecdotes are an excellent way to display impact and compel empathy or sympathy from the reader.

FINISH STRONG AND CALL THE READER TO ACTION

End your content by leaving the reader feeling compelled to make a change in their beliefs, attitude, or action.

A few ways to finish strong and make an impact include the following:

- Concluding with a phrase or thought that appeared in the opening. Remember, the opening sentence had to be captivating to hook the audience. The closing paragraph/sentence needs that same impact to compel reflection and, more importantly, action.
- Stating a specific action(s) for the reader to take after reading the op-ed. Whether it is to take a specific action, share the article with a friend, or reflect further, this direction makes all the difference in promoting change.

EDITING IS A PROCESS—GO THROUGH IT

Ask someone with more distance from the issue than you or the author to review your submission for the following:

- Simplicity
- Voice and tone (conversational)
- Clarity
- Coherence and unity
- Accuracy of quotations (direct and paraphrased)

Op-eds, LTEs, and ADCs are generally opinion-based and are validated by the presentation of facts. Citing sources in an op-ed or LTE is not necessary but be ready to show the sources to an editor or others, if asked. Avoid citing other people so much that the opinion and personal experiences from you or the author are lost—your personal arguments should construct the bulk of the content.

Finally, make sure the piece aligns with the formatting guidelines and word limits of the selected publication.

PITCH AND PLACE YOUR PIECE

After submitting the piece to the publication, submit a follow-up letter or email expressing gratitude that the piece is being considered for publication.

If the op-ed, LTE, or ADC is accepted for publication, expand the reach and impact by announcing the piece on your organization's website or through your social media networks. Remember to tell your friends and colleagues about it too!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Community Toolbox (University of Kansas): <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/participation/promoting-interest/guest-columns-editorials/main>

The Earth Institute Op-Ed Guide (Columbia University): <https://www.earth.columbia.edu/help/oped-guide.html>

Duke University's Office of News and Communications Op-Ed Article: <https://commskit.duke.edu/writing-media/writing-effective-op-eds/>

The New York Time's Op-Ed Article on Op-Eds: <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/01/opinion/and-now-a-word-from-op-ed.html>

Harvard Kennedy School's Communications Program Op-Ed Article: https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hks-communications-program/files/new_seglin_how_to_write_an_oped_1_25_17_7.pdf

“We cannot create what we can't imagine.”
—Lucille Clifton