

Writing Commentary for the Press

Online Resource



Hints and Tips

When writing anything, it can be useful to start with three basic questions. Writing for the press is no exception to this rule:

- Who is your audience and what do they currently know or think?
- What do you want your audience to know or think?
- What is the shortest achievable distance between those two points?

In addition to these, here are a few pointers that are worth bearing in mind when writing in this particular format.

1. Position your argument in relation to something happening in the world. Context is king here and the reader (and the editor) will want to know why they should consider this issue important. The easiest way to achieve this is to show the relevancy of your argument to something which is already of concern to your reader.
2. Get straight into the action. Academic writing can often be quite defensive, demonstrating methodological rigour or otherwise caveating the writer's claim before getting into the meat of the argument. When writing for a more general audience, you need to get straight into your main point.
3. Limit yourself to one (or, at most, two) points. As well as helping the reader to understand the point you are making, this will also help with sticking to word limits.
4. Word limits and deadlines matter. In journalism, the word limit relates directly to the amount of space on the page and is immutable. Similarly, the deadline (a time not a date) relates to when the entire page needs to be sent off to be designed and printed. Breaking either deadlines or word limits throws the production cycle off and often means that you are unlikely to be asked to contribute again.
5. Read before you write. Before you write for any publication, it is worth reading a few editions – especially the 'slot' you are writing for. This will give you an idea of the required tone of the article as well as some sense of the commissioning editor's interests and, conversely, which issues have been done to death.
6. Have a beginning, a middle and an end. In the words of the old advertising saying, 'Tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them; tell them what you told them'. Particularly when being introduced to new or unfamiliar ideas and perspectives, the reader is hugely assisted by knowing what is coming next.
7. Brevity really is the soul of wit. Keep sentences short. Clauses too. Avoid the passive voice, semi-colons and sub-clauses.

8. This is a newspaper article. That means no bullet points, numbered paragraphs, footnotes, citations, references, hyperlinks, graphs, charts, use of verse, emoji, lengthy quotations, slang or technical terminology, unexplained acronyms, libel or other defamatory statement. Also, don't waste your time writing a headline – this is done by a sub-editor.
9. Discuss ideas, not structures. While newspapers and their readers are genuinely interested in academic analysis and opinion, they are not interested in finding out about new research centres, networks, initiatives or funding streams. Discuss the findings and why they matter, not the means of getting to them.

This guide was written by Nick Bibby, School of Social and Political Science University of Edinburgh and was produced for the OpEd writing workshop, organised by the CAHSS KE Office, April 2018

For advice and support on writing for the media, contact the [Edd McCracken in Press Office](#).