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How to Write an Editorial

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Have you ever read an editorial? If you have, you have probably noticed how different they are from one writer to another. It can be very difficult to know what aspects of editorial writing you should include in your own editorial and which ones you shouldn't; if you know what you should include in an editorial then you will be able to make your argument(s) more convincing. Since being able to write a good editorial can be a very invaluable tool in expressing your opinion to the world, it is essential to first know what you should include in an editorial, thus making your argument more convincing to the reader. The purpose of this paper is to better explain what makes a good editorial, and hopefully make it easier for you to put your opinions into words and express them to the world. To succeed in editorial writing, you will want to use the correct structure, achieve a good balance between facts and opinion, provide reliable evidence to support your opinion, and use your persuasion technique(s) effectively.

Before you can write an editorial you must first know what one is. An editorial is a piece of writing in which the author gives facts to the reader, and then goes on to provide an opinion. This is followed by the author giving reasons as to why he/she believes said opinion. There are two main reasons why people write editorials: to get an opinion that is not widely known into public view, or to try to persuade the reader into believing the author's opinion (Abreu, personal communication, April 9, 2006).

Now that you know what an editorial is, the traditional structure can be discussed; the first thing you want to make sure you have is the correct structure. The correct structure of an editorial is to first give the news event that you will be talking about (McDougall p.60). This is one of the most important things in an editorial, considering that the author wants his/her reader to understand the principles behind his/her opinion. Therefore, the beginning of your editorial should have no opinion in it; it should just be facts. The editorial "Making Democracy Credible," an anonymously written editorial from the *New York Times*, starts out with "Time is growing short to head off more embarrassing voter machine scandals" ("Making Democracy Credible"). The author of this editorial makes a misstep by expressing an opinion before fact: "embarrassing voter machine scandals" ("Making Democracy Credible"). This does not allow the reader time to take in the facts, which results in a credibility gap between writer and reader. In contrast to the previous example, Adam Cohen, author

of “What W. B. Yeats’s ‘Second Coming’ Really Says about the Iraq War” lets the reader know the facts before expressing his opinion. He starts by saying “The Brookings Institute...just released a report on the Iraq War...Jim McDermott...took the House floor...to demand that President Bush present a plan for Iraq” (Cohen). Cohen does an effective job here of letting the reader know what the facts are in his argument before letting the reader know his opinion. This is essential for the reader to believe his claim because if he doesn’t offer facts first, the reader will have no reason to believe him. If he was to just offer his opinion first then the reader would have no reason to trust his credibility, and thus no reason to believe his opinions.

The next thing to do in the traditional structure of an editorial is to give a “clear cut for or against” the topic that you previously outlined (McDougall p.60). This is a relatively simple step, since all you have to do is say whether or not you like or dislike the situation that you described. It is important to let the reader know your stance on the subject before you offer reasons for that stance because if you offer the reason first, the reader won’t know what those reasons are supporting. In the editorial “Edwards Gets it Right, by Paul Krugman, Krugman does a good job of letting the reader know his stance on the subject he is talking about, in this case Edwards’ health care plan, before giving reasons why. For example, “I won’t trust presidential candidates on health care unless they provide enough specifics to show both that they understand the issues, and that they’re willing to face up to hard choices when necessary” (Krugman). Since Krugman let the reader know his stance on the subject before giving evidence to support that stance, it allows the reader to better know what the facts are supporting. Then, because of that, the reader is allowed to make a more educated decision on whether or not he/she agrees with him.

The final step in the correct structure is to provide the reasons that you have for believing your claim (McDougall p.60). This is the most important step, since the reader will not believe your argument if you do not have good reasons to back it up. In the article “The Other Defense Budget,” an anonymously written editorial, the author starts out by making the point that “American troops...deserve every penny requested for them in President Bush’s new \$622 billion Pentagon budget” (“The Other Defense Budget”). Then the author goes on to say “several of the programs [in the budget] can be cancelled outright” (“The Other Defense Budget”). After reading how the author thinks that American troops deserve every penny in the Defense budget, one would expect facts supporting this claim. The evidence that the author gives to support the claim, however, actually contradicts the claim; this creates a credibility gap between the author and the reader. On the other hand, in the article “Edwards Gets It Right,” by Paul Krugman, Krugman provides extensive support for his

claim that John Edwards has a good health care plan. In support of his claim, Krugman says how former Senator John Edwards has set a fine example [in proposing a health care plan]...Mr. Edwards sets out to cover the uninsured with a combination of regulation and financial aid. Right now, many people are uninsured because, insurance companies “game the system to cover only healthy people.” So the Edwards plan imposes “community rating” on insurers, basically requiring them to sell insurance to everyone at the same price...The Edwards plan...offers financial aid to help lower-income families buy insurance. [Edwards’ plan] would “require all American residents to get insurance,” and would require that all employers either provide insurance to their workers or pay a percentage of their payrolls into a government fund used to buy insurance...[In Edwards’ plan] people who don’t get insurance from their employers won’t have to deal individually with insurance companies: they’d purchase insurance through “Health Markets”: government-run bodies negotiating with insurance companies on the public’s behalf (Krugman).

With the level of evidence that Krugman gives to support his claim it is more likely that the reader will believe his claim. If Krugman did not supply so many facts in support of his argument, the reader would not have any reason to believe his argument. This is why, to get the reader to believe the point you are making in your editorial, you must provide reliable evidence in support of your claim.

In addition to providing evidence to support your opinion you want to achieve a good balance between facts and opinion. This is a very important step, since if you do not provide good evidence that supports your opinion, the reader will have no reason to believe you claim(s). As John Hulteng says, an editorial writer may not know “that somewhere along the way [in writing the editorial that he/she]...left a structural weakness that makes the whole [argument] vulnerable” (p.84). Hulteng is making the point here that if the writer of an editorial does not properly balance his/her presentation of fact and opinion that the reader will not trust the argument that the author is making. There are two ways that can happen, the first being that the author provides too much opinion compared to how much fact that he/she gives. The second is that he/she gives too many facts, so that the article is weighed down, with not enough opinion analyzing the facts. In the article “The Comptroller Choice,” an anonymously written editorial, the author does not achieve a balance between opinion and facts; the author provides too much opinion and not enough fact. The author starts off saying

New York’s Legislature appears poised to make a highly irresponsible decision about one of [New York’s] most important offices. Legislatures, who have the authority to pick a replacement for the former comptroller... seem

to be ready to throw aside qualifications – and a selection process they agreed to – and give the job to one of their own. In particular, they seem to be rallying around Thomas DiNapoli...Mr. DiNapoli is a good legislator and – perhaps more important, since Democrats have the controlling votes – a very loyal Democrat. But lawmakers should ask themselves: what are his credentials to be New York's top financial auditor?...And what are his credentials to be the sole trustee of the state's \$145.7 billion pension fund? Once again, two decades in Albany is not enough...All three [other candidates] have vastly more financial managerial experience, and they are not beholden to the Albany power structure ("The Comptroller Choice").

Although the author of this article gives his/her opinion, which is what an editorial is for, the author fails to provide enough facts to support that opinion. This results in the reader not having a good reason to believe the author's opinion. The author of the article "While the Election Watchdog Wanders," on the other hand, makes the mistake of providing too many facts, and not enough opinion. The author says

The presidential campaign's heated fundraising sweepstakes finds lobbyists hurriedly...amassing additional hundreds of thousands from donors to re-stake surviving contenders for the next primary rounds...A partisan standoff blocks the Senate from filling four existing vacancies on the Federal Election Commission...The Republican minority leader...is refusing to allow individual up-or-down majority votes... [He also] threatens a filibuster unless they are voted on as a single package...President Bush refuses to withdraw the von Spakovsky nomination, while the Democrats demand he be considered on his individual record ("While the Election Watchdog Wanders").

The author of this editorial offers almost no opinion in his/her whole piece. This creates a credibility gap between the author and the reader because the reader is reading an editorial to hear the author's opinion on a subject. Since the reader does not receive what they are expecting from the author's article, this makes it difficult for the reader to trust the author's argument. Although facts are necessary in an editorial, they have to be accompanied by an equal amount of opinion. An editorial's purpose is to give the author's opinion on a subject, and if there is no opinion, it ceases to be an editorial.

In addition to balancing facts and opinion, providing reliable evidence is also necessary when writing an effective editorial. However, it can be very difficult to find information to support

your argument. Hillier Kreighbaum tells how reference books, newspapers, and magazines are good sources for support on your argument (p.119). As Brian S. Konradt says, an editorial is only as good as its facts. [If you don't provide facts] you have nothing but a half-formed opinion. Get the back story, understand your argument inside-out. Research every aspect of your topic and cite as many facts as possible; generalities are the death of interesting editorials" (Konradt).

In the article "A Battle over Prisons," an anonymously written editorial, the author does not supply an ample amount of evidence to warrant his/her conclusion. Almost the whole article is him/her saying their opinion; thus the reader isn't given much reason to believe his/her claims. The article "Fudging The Budget," by Stephen Ratner, on the other hand, does a good job of using reliable evidence to support its claim that "private sector accounting rules [should be brought] to the government" (Ratner). Ratner supports this by saying

The 'official' deficit figure for the 2006 fiscal year is just under \$250 billion. But a more accurate calculation would indicate a deficit nearly three times higher, and that is even without including some vast obligations the government owes...These adjustments concentrate on one gap in federal budget bookkeeping: the government's failure to properly account for the cost of pensions for its own workers. Simply incorporating this liability would increase the federal budget by roughly \$200 billion...Unlike a private company, which keeps such overages in its pension fund to cover future benefits, the White House pockets the money and declares the deficit to be smaller...If we adjusted properly for pensions and entitlements, we would leave unaddressed the largest financing gap...by some estimates, \$39 trillion would have to be set aside now to pay for Social Security, Medicare and similar benefits that have already been promised. Just a year ago, those future obligations were \$3 trillion less (Ratner).

In this article Ratner provides ample evidence, which allows the reader to believe his claim. Another thing to think about when writing an editorial is the persuasion technique you use, and there are many different techniques that you can utilize. Ian Abreu, an editorial writer for *The Comment*, told me in an interview that his main persuasion technique is to "appeal to the reader's emotions" (Abreu, personal communication, April 9, 2006). The appeal to

emotion would be using pathos to accomplish the objective of persuading the reader. On the other hand you could also use logos, appeal to logic, or ethos, appeal based on the character of the author (The Art of Rhetoric). An example of an argument based on would be one where the author uses a reader's emotions to try to get his/her point across. An example of using ethos would be when the author uses his/her credentials as support for believing his/her claim. An example of using logos would be when the author attempts to persuade the reader by using logic. You can also use humor as a way to persuade your readers (MacDougall p.83). Humor can be a very effective tool, because, if used effectively the reader will be amused, and at the same time be taking in the point that the author is making. So whatever persuasion technique you decide to use, you need to make sure you use it effectively.

Editorials are very effective tools in shaping public opinion. Their purpose is to "open up the eyes" of the public to issues that are either unreported or underreported (Abreu, personal communication, April 9, 2006). You can find editorials almost anywhere; however, the best places to look would be newspapers or magazines since they have writers that are solely dedicated to editorial writing. Although editorials can be very effective, to do so they have to follow certain guidelines such as using the correct structure, achieving a good balance between facts and opinion, providing reliable evidence to support your opinion, and using your persuasion technique(s) effectively.

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