

🔍 How to turn your journal article into an op-ed



From a Journal Article to an Op-Ed: A Framework for Academics

Introduction

As a researcher, you've uncovered valuable insights that could shape discussions, influence policy and inform public understanding. But to reach a wider audience, your message needs to be clear, concise and accessible. This guide will help you transform your research findings into an engaging op-ed that resonates with readers beyond academia.

Op-Ed Essentials: The Basics

- **Word count:** Aim for 800–1200 words.
- **Focus:** Pick one main argument from your research. Avoid covering too many subtopics. Instead, concentrate on a single, powerful takeaway.
- **Audience:** Write for an interested but non-specialist reader, like a curious matriculant or a colleague who isn't in your discipline.

Step 1: Define Your Core Argument

Your research covers multiple findings, but for an op-ed, you'll need to select a single key theme or argument that will act as your "golden thread." This main argument keeps your article cohesive and helps you avoid getting sidetracked.



Key Questions to Answer

1. What's the main problem?

- Begin by stating the core issue your research addresses. Avoid technical jargon; if you use any complex terms, provide a clear definition.
- *Example:* "My research focuses on the impact of air pollution on urban health, aiming to uncover the long-term risks of daily exposure to poor air quality."

2. Why do these findings matter?

- This is the "so-what factor." Explain why your findings are relevant and important, and what gaps in knowledge they address.
- *Example:* "These findings are critical because they reveal that air pollution affects not just the lungs, but also cardiovascular health, even at levels previously considered safe. This has huge implications for urban policies on air quality standards."

3. What needs to happen next?

- Provide actionable recommendations based on your findings. Outline who should act — policymakers, industry leaders, local governments — and what they need to do.
- *Example:* "Given these findings, we recommend stricter air quality regulations and increased green space in urban areas to mitigate health risks. Policymakers should consider updating air quality standards and prioritising public health in urban planning."



Step 2: Crafting a Compelling Headline

Your headline is the first thing people will see, so it needs to be clear, engaging and informative. A strong headline captures attention and gives readers a reason to dive into your article. Here's how to create one that works:

1. Focus on Your Main Argument

- Identify the primary insight or claim from your research. Your headline should reflect this key message in a way that sparks curiosity or emphasises its importance.
- *Example:* If your research reveals that “green spaces in urban areas improve mental health,” your headline could be, “How Green Spaces in Cities Could Be the Key to Better Mental Health.”

2. Be Clear, Not Jargon-Laden

- Avoid technical language in your headline. Instead, choose terms that will resonate with the general public.
- *Example:* Instead of “Neuroplasticity and its Impact on Cognition,” try “How Our Brains Change: The Science of Neuroplasticity and Memory.”

3. Consider a ‘Why’ or ‘How’ Question

- Headlines that start with “Why” or “How” are often more engaging and signal that readers will get a clear answer or solution.
- *Example:* “Why Access to Clean Water is Essential for Global Health” or “How Reducing Screen Time Could Boost Mental Well-Being.”



4. Use Numbers When Possible

- If your research findings can be broken down into actionable points, consider a list-style headline.
- *Example: "3 Ways Green Spaces Improve City Life" or "5 Key Findings on How Social Media Impacts Young Adults' Mental Health."*

Pro Tips

- **Keep it concise:** Aim for 8-12 words.
- **Be specific:** General statements are less compelling than specific claims.
- **Test different options:** Write 3-5 headlines and choose the one that feels the most direct and impactful.

Step 3: Structuring Your Op-Ed

1. Lead with Your Findings

- Unlike a journal article, start with the key findings. (Hint: these are usually buried in the conclusion of your research paper). Lead with the key findings and their significance to draw readers in immediately. This gives them a clear idea of the op-ed's focus without a long background section, which isn't necessary for a news item.

2. Use Simple, Clear Language

- Avoid academic or technical language. If you must use a complex term, briefly define it in plain language.



3. Keep It Conversational

- Imagine you're explaining your findings at a family gathering. Aim for a tone that's informative yet approachable. Your goal is to spark interest, not to impress with academic terminology.

Step 4: Final Tips for Engaging Writing

- **Be direct:** Start sentences with the subject and keep your points sharp.
- **Include a call to action:** Encourage readers or specific stakeholders to take steps based on your recommendations.
- **Edit for flow:** Each paragraph should support the main argument, moving logically from problem to significance to solutions.

Get Started

Now that you have a framework, start with these questions and draft short, clear responses for each one. Remember, your op-ed should be an invitation to engage with your research, sparking curiosity and dialogue. With this guide, you're well on your way to sharing your insights with the world.

Once you have a draft, consider sharing it with your university's communication or marketing department. They can assist you with refining the piece and distributing it to the right media outlets to maximise its impact.

Drop me a line and let me know how it goes, I'd love to hear from you: nontobeko@magalelamedia.co.za.

