



CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATIONS TIPS

Writing Op-Eds

1. Be strategic in choosing the author(s).

- Someone the editors might like because well known (such as politician or religious leader) or unusual (such as surprising ally or a worker with a gripping story to tell).
- Someone who helps build broad public support (might mean a respected community advocate for quality services instead of a union leader).
- Should be seen as having particular expertise or personal experience on the issue.
- Normally just one person, but sometimes works to have co-authors who make an interesting or surprising combination. Never more than two.

2. The headline, first two sentences, and closing sentence are critical because that's all the editor may read when deciding whether to consider it for publication.

The first two sentences should...

- Catch readers' attention through use of a provocative question, surprising statement, or interesting juxtaposition.
- Raise a broad public policy issue (that's what makes this an op-ed and not something that belongs on news pages) and establish the public-interest angle.
- If possible, tie into current news.

"I always thought that the American Dream meant that if you worked hard, you could raise a good family and be part of a strong community. But now I'm beginning to wonder if that's true here in New Jersey."

The headline should be short, catchy, and convey the main theme: *"What's Happened To the American Dream in New Jersey?"* Editors will rarely use your headline, but it affects their impression of whether your op-ed is worth publishing, and it may affect the headline that they write.

The last sentence should play off the lead sentences to leave a lasting impression:

"Building owners should respect our hard work and give us the chance to make the American dream come true for our families and communities."

3. **Body copy should "show" rather than "claim."** Present hard facts, case studies, quotes, and real-life anecdotes – not rhetoric and unsubstantiated assertions.
4. **Tone throughout should be thoughtful and rational** – not alarmist, nasty, sarcastic, or personal. Don't attack the newspaper's editors. Don't use exclamation marks.
5. **Keep it short** – no more than 500 words for the best chance of being published and read.
6. **Don't repeat opposition arguments for them.** When responding to an opponent's op-ed or hostile editorial, start with your main message – not theirs. When you refer to opposition arguments, do so indirectly or re-frame them the way we see them:

"Nursing home owners in West Virginia have sought to downplay their own problems by arguing that companies in other states are even worse."

7. **Don't be obvious about tooting your own horn.** Editors will stop reading if an op-ed sounds too much like a press release: *"More than 10,000 SEIU janitors have just won a groundbreaking contract that provides good wages, health insurance, and full-time jobs."*

Note: The headlines on this example is the headlines the newspaper editors put on when the op-eds were printed.

NEWARK STAR LEDGER, APRIL 4, 2001

Janitors struggle while companies clean up

By Mirqueya Lluberes

I always thought that the American dream meant that if you worked hard, you could raise a good family and be part of a strong community. But now I'm beginning to wonder if that's true here in New Jersey.

Millions of dollars are coming into our state as big office buildings are built for some of the world's largest corporations. The real estate companies and investors that own those buildings are making lots of money – but not much of it is reaching the families like mine who do the work to make it all possible.

I'm one of the 10,000 janitors who clean those office buildings. Every night, I push a vacuum, carry heavy garbage bags and keep the offices clean, safe, and comfortable. I clean an entire office building floor in four hours.

In return for doing this physically difficult job, I am paid \$5.50 an hour – way below the poverty line. The company gives many of us only part-time hours, so to survive I have to work another part-time job. In all, I make \$200 a week. My mother is a cleaner, too, and with some help from her, I pay the \$600 monthly rent, buy food, clothes, and school supplies for my 7-year-old son, Juan, and pay a baby sitter so I can work.

If my son or I need to see a doctor, I have to pay out of my own pocket because the company doesn't provide meaningful benefits. That means we can't go to the doctor except in emergencies. That last time my son was very sick with the flu, I had to take him to the hospital emergency room. They did a blood test, which cost more than \$300. That devastated me. No one should have to decide between taking a child to the doctor or paying the rent.

I work hard, pay my taxes, and contribute to my community, but my family and I are not being treated like human beings – and we're not the only ones. Recently, I've gotten involved in the Justice for Janitors campaign, where I have met many other cleaners who need better wages, decent health insurance, and full-time jobs.

There are more than 20,000 of us on the East Coast, and we have the support of many religious leaders and community groups.

What we are asking from the building owners and cleaning contractors is simple. Respect our hard work and give us the chance to make the American dream come true for our families and our communities.

Mirqueya Lluberes is a janitor in a Hoboken office building.

