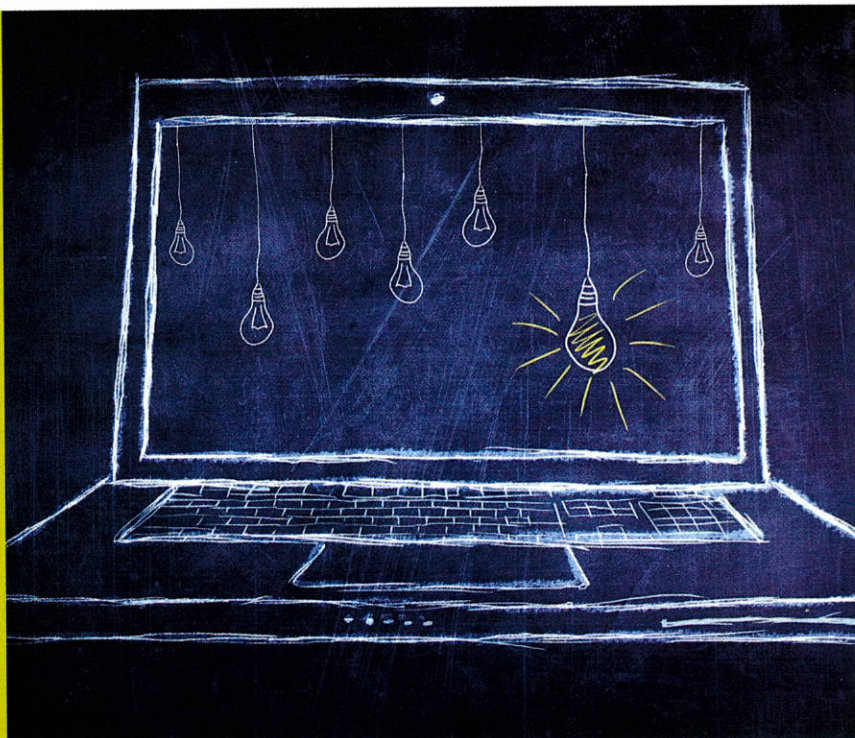


How to write an opinion essay and why you should do it now

By Marybeth Gasman



Advocacy

A prolific op-ed writer says educators should spend more time sharing their ideas by becoming proficient at writing opinion pieces.

Deepen your understanding of this article with questions and activities in this month's *Kappan* Professional Development Discussion Guide by Lois Brown Easton. Download a PDF of the guide at kappanmagazine.org.

As educators, we often think of ourselves as instilling ideas and learning in others through our teaching and research. Our teaching occurs inside classrooms or sometimes in hallways, and our research is reported in academic journals or scholarly books. Most of us say we care about making change in the nation and the world, but if we're only teaching in classrooms and publishing in scholarly outlets, is our influence really as significant as it could be? I don't think so.

To have a larger and lasting effect, educators must write for education and mainstream media outlets. When I tell most faculty members and educators that they should write op-ed or opinion pieces, the first response is "I can't dumb down my work." My response? If your work is not written in an inclusive, accessible way, how can it influence anyone? I regularly write opinion pieces for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Diverse Issues*, *The Huffington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. Over the past few years, I have written several hundred op-eds. Since I've started doing that, I've improved the quality of my writing, become a quicker writer, and have been forced to become more well-read in order to speak to larger and more diverse audiences.

Another common excuse is that educators have nothing important to say. If you have nothing important to say, then what are you doing every day as you teach and research? Are you really learning nothing from your work?

The last and perhaps the most troubling excuse is "I'm afraid to take a stand." My internal response is "Are you kidding me? How can you care about children, young people, and justice, and be afraid?" But I typically respond by saying that you have nothing to fear as long as your opinion is based on data.

MARYBETH GASMAN (mgasman@gse.upenn.edu) is a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, Philadelphia, Penn., where she also directs the Center for Minority Serving Institutions.



How to start

I've developed a pattern that works for me when I write an opinion piece. All writers have to discover what works best for them, but adapting my approaches might help you get started.

I begin each day with the idea that I will find something to write about. I read widely every morning to stimulate my thinking and to find national ideas that link to my research. I typically look on Facebook and Twitter to see what people are talking about. I read *The New York Times*, *InsideHigherEd*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* for ideas. I let the ideas comingle in my head for a few hours. Then I jot down my three main ideas about a particular topic—these are the three things that I want to communicate very succinctly. I support these three main ideas with data from my research or examples. Then I write an introduction that grabs the reader enough that he or she wants to continue reading. Finally, I write a conclusion that takes a stand on the issue and pushes people to think differently. You have to be brave if you want to write opinion pieces.

Once your idea is on paper, there are other issues that you need to think about. You must be brief: Most media outlets don't want opinion pieces longer than 800 words, especially *The New York Times*. I know you might be wondering how you can fit your brilliant thoughts into 800 words or less, but, believe me, you can, and your writing will be much tighter and more brilliant as a result.

In addition to being brief, you have to be quick. If you see a hot topic being discussed in the media, notice a controversy brewing, are fired up about something, or have been asked by a media outlet to write an essay, you have to turn it around quickly. Quickly means about three days maximum. Most academics work slowly, and this is a hindrance if you want to write opinion pieces. You have to learn to be nimble and avoid perfection; it's the difference between pressing your pencil hard on a piece of paper and gliding your pencil across the page to make a beautiful line.

Here's another tip, and this may be the hardest: You have to write for a general audience. This means that you must drop all of that horrific academic jargon that you hold on to so tightly. Pick up a copy of either *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser or *Stylish Academic Writing* by Helen Sword. Good writing is clear writing that is inclusive, not exclusionary. I wish that Ph.D. programs would teach students how to write in a vibrant way along with how to conduct research, as the best research can't do much unless it's communicated effectively. When writing opinion pieces, you don't want to be detached and emotionless as so many academics are taught to be in

their doctoral programs. Your intellect and passion for your topic should show, but you must support everything with data.

If you want to write opinion pieces, you must become comfortable taking a stand on controversial issues. I regularly take stands on issues of equal opportunity, racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. I push and prod people to think differently and to consider their role in making meaningful change.

When you take a stand, people will critique you and may lash out at you. You have to be OK with that. You have to be thick-skinned, and you can't fixate on whether you're popular with all readers. If your opinion piece is published in an online venue, which most are, you'll inevitably get hateful comments and the occasional mean-spirited email. I suggest not reading these comments nor responding to the emails. Engaging with people who have constructive, even challenging things to say, is fine and often quite a lot of fun. But do not, let me repeat that—do not—engage with mean and hateful people online. Fighting with them is a waste of your time or energy.

One of the great rewards for writing opinion pieces is the audience you'll reach. The average peer-reviewed work rarely reaches more than 1,000 people and usually only a few hundred. Opinion pieces that are published online can reach thousands of readers and are posted, reposted, tweeted, and retweeted over and over again. Unlike peer-reviewed work (which is important—don't get me wrong, I do a tremendous amount of peer-reviewed work), opinion pieces are short, punchy, and easy to read. Opinion pieces allow you an easy way to capture the attention of policy makers, journalists, funders, practitioners, and the general public around issues that are important to you.

So break out of your comfort zone, and write an opinion piece. Write with your passion—perhaps the passion that was the impetus for becoming an educator in the first place. **K**

You have to be brave if you want to write opinion pieces and become comfortable taking a stand on controversial issues.

Tips for writing op-ed pieces

- Be brave. Nobody wants to read a lackluster opinion piece.
- Be brief. Publishers generally like opinion pieces that don't exceed 800 words.
- Be quick. When you see a topic that appeals to you and is relevant to your work, write about it today, not tomorrow!
- Be conversational. Leave your scholarly tone and big words at home.
- Be prepared. You may get some kickback when your opinions are published.