

## The Opinion Essay

You will recall that genres are the means by which a community responds to a recurring rhetorical situation. Editorials are the response of newspaper publishers to their position as shapers of civic opinion. They know that what they publish influences the way their fellow citizens approach matters that concern them *as citizens*. Over the years, readers have come to expect these essays to address topics that concern them as members of a community, to treat them like adults, and to include persuasive arguments that urge them to take some kind of action for the public good. Editorials generally make arguments about policies, about what we should do for the common good. They attempt to answer the question, “What should we do in this particular situation that will create the most good for the greatest number?”

The editorial fulfills that purpose by being accessible to everyone who can get and read a newspaper, by remaining brief enough to encourage that readership, by keeping a tight focus on a particular issue, and by addressing an issue when there is still time to do something about it. Following are a couple of editorials about attempts to reform the ways student loans are subsidized by the federal government.

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Needless Student Loan Subsidies

With Congressional hearings on the student loan scandal scheduled for next week, lawmakers are looking around for ways to root out the kinds of corruption uncovered in recent investigations by New York’s attorney general, Andrew Cuomo. A good start would be to pass the Student Loan Sunshine Act, an important bill that was introduced months ago.

The Sunshine Act would make it a federal crime for lenders to offer college officials anything of value in exchange for the right to do business at a given school. The new law would require the colleges to explain publicly why they had placed a

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**Comment [b1]:** When a newspaper publishes an editorial written by members of the editorial staff, it usually does not print the writer’s name because the essay is only written after the editors discuss the issue and agree what their position will be. These opinion essays are collaborative. A newspaper’s editorials are generally considered to have a kind of authority that may not be credited to an individual writer.

**Comment [b2]:** Introduces topic and makes it timely.

**Comment [b3]:** Uses verb that suggests pulling out bad weeds.

**Comment [b4]:** Uses the last sentence of the first paragraph—a powerful position—to recommend one of the actions the rest of the article will try to persuade readers is the best action to take. Notice that by saying a “a good start”, the writer leaves room to add in other recommended actions.

**Comment [b5]:** Provides support for main claim. This paragraph appeals to a reader’s sense of fair play by claiming that the law will stop unfair actions going on now—college officials taking gifts in exchange for pointing students to certain lenders not because those lenders are the best choice for students, but because the officials get freebies.

given lender on the school's "preferred lender" list and would force the institutions to disclose any special deals that had been made behind the scenes.

Congress also needs to strengthen the Education Department's lending oversight office, which has recently seemed more interested in protecting lenders' interests than in anything else. One possibility would be to place the lending oversight function in the inspector general's office of the Education Department, where it would be relatively safe from partisan tampering and influence peddling.

Congress also needs to revisit the Federal Family Education Loan Program, under which the government pays lenders unnecessary federal subsidies – and protects the lenders from defaults by borrowers – when they lend to students. The program costs billions more than the rival direct-loan program, under which students borrow straight from the government.

Under one proposal, the government would cut subsidies and force lenders to compete for the right to participate in the program, thus driving down costs. Some in Congress want to cut subsidies and direct the savings resulting from such a change into student aid. Either option would be better than the corrupt and wasteful program we have now.



Reform might hurt students

Haste to 'punish' lenders could harm lessen customer service, hike raise costs.

By Joe Belew

**Comment [b6]:** Here, the writer recommends a second action.

**Comment [b7]:** The words tampering and peddling imply that right now, the lending oversight office makes decisions based on political favoritism instead of sound fiscal policy.

**Comment [b8]:** Here, the writer recommends a third action.

**Comment [b9]:** Calling the federal subsidies "unnecessary" is really an argument of definition. The writer does not offer evidence that the subsidies are unnecessary, but trusts the readers to share his opinion that lenders make plenty of money off student loans and do not federal assistance.

**Comment [b10]:** The writer sets up a comparison and contrast so that he or she can argue that the second option is more valuable than the other.

**Comment [b11]:** The assumption underlying this claim is that if lenders were exposed to competitive market forces, they would reduce the amount of subsidies they ask from the government in order to participate in federal student loan programs.

**Comment [b12]:** The writer concludes by clearly identifying the action he or she wants while leaving room for some argument about which option will ultimately be best.

**Comment [b13]:** The fact that this essay has a writer's name, or by-line, tells the reader that this is the opinion of the writer and not the newspaper's official opinion. The information about the writer at the bottom of the essay tells the reader that the writer has a vested interest in how student loans are supported and regulated by the government.

Congress is about to make a mistake, and it is a whopper. To increase need-based student aid without new taxes and to "punish" student loan lenders for questionable marketing practices, it is considering cutting the return to guaranteed loan providers by as much as \$18 billion over the next five years.

**Comment [b14]:** The writer introduces both his topic—student loans—and his opinion in the opening sentence. By including the word about, the writer also makes the topic timely.

If these cuts are adopted, most loans will cost more, service will decline and choice of lenders will diminish.

**Comment [b15]:** Claims that these alternatives will lead to undesirable consequences... He will offer support for these three claims in the following paragraphs.

First, let's address the claim that questionable student loan marketing practices were caused by lenders being paid too much to participate in the federally guaranteed loan program. No one has shown such a connection; it's also illogical. Slim profit margins mean lenders have to fight for more volume to compensate. Heated competition works in students' favor.

**Comment [b16]:** The writer relies here on the assumption that free markets produce the lowest costs

For the record, student-loan providers support new reforms. Lenders welcome clearer rules, uniformly enforced. The questionable marketing practices recently publicized are a thing of the past.

Much more important to the current debate is the question, "Whose subsidies are they proposing to cut?" A close look at the guaranteed loan program suggests that we are talking about borrower subsidies, and here's why.

Virtually all lenders now pay borrower origination fees. Many reward borrowers who pay on time with interest rate discounts. These benefits are paid for out of the return lenders earn on loans. Cuts to lenders will likely end these benefits. Students will lose.

Similarly, borrowers now receive state-of-the-art customer service. Cutting loan provider yield will reduce the quality of this customer service. If higher borrower delinquencies and defaults result, program costs could actually increase as a result. Students and taxpayers lose.

Perhaps most important, guaranteed loans have been wholly reliable since the program was created in 1965. Borrowers who have needed loans have been able to get them on time and glitch-free. This, too, could be jeopardized by the proposed cuts.

The [Federal Family Education Loan program](#) has been a winner for America's students. Through it, borrowers have had a choice of lenders, and that choice has promoted good service, lower prices and reliability. That is what is at stake in the current debate.

*Joe Belew is president of the Consumer Bankers Association.*

## Rhetorical Analysis

**Purpose:** The purpose of these editorials was to persuade voters that their legislators needed to vote a particular way on a bill about student loans that was being considered during the summer Congressional session.

**Timing:** Both editorials appeared *before* the legislator voted, so what they were arguing was important at just that moment.

**Exigence:** The relationships between universities and the banks that loan student money has important financial consequences for students and their families, so both writers highlighted that to make readers see the urgency of their arguments.

**Readers:**

In the editorials above, the writers address the readers as taxpayers and as citizens concerned about the future of college education.

**Writer:** The writers we've considered here had a stake in what they were writing. The first editorial reflects the opinion of a group of people who comment on public policy for a living. The second writer makes a living as a member of the lending industry and the policy changes are likely to affect his daily work life. The writer's background knowledge and experience, relationship to the issues, to the forum, and to potential readers all influence what the writer can say and how readers will respond.

**The medium or the forum**

Editorials are usually published in two places at once: the newspaper and the newspaper's webpage. As this is being written, most of the web presentations still look a lot like newspapers and the newspapers geographic location still shapes the community the newspaper addresses. Newspapers also have an established political position that affects who reads it and affects what it publishes. Each of these editorials were published in major papers.

**Genre:**

Move pattern:

1. Introduce issue.
2. Give it a sense of urgency.
3. Claim that readers should think about it or act upon it in a specific way.
4. Provide support for that main claim with evidence, reasoning, or by appealing to shared values and beliefs.
5. Appeal to values of equality, fair play, and a commitment to the common good over individual gain.
6. Claim that alternatives lead to undesirable consequences.
7. Name the positions or actions readers should take.

Language use:

- Third person
- Active voice
- Standard English
- Strong verbs

Design features:

- Short paragraphs
- Relatively brief overall
- No visuals or graphics
- Headline names the issue

## Ethical Considerations

Opinion essays are a genre that participates in advocacy journalism. In spite of the frequent fire journalists draw for being biased, inaccurate, or for outright distorting the truth, most journalists honestly try to hold to the journalists' code of ethics. The preamble to its Code of Ethics, the Society of Professional Journalists begins with this statement: "Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues." <sup>i</sup> the code itself includes these four key values:

- seek truth and report it
- minimize harm
- act independently
- be accountable

In the section on seeking truth and reporting it, the code gives special consideration to the genre of the opinion essay, a consideration that applies to all genres of advocacy journalism. It exhorts journalists to “Distinguish between advocacy and news reporting. Analysis and commentary should be labeled and not misrepresent fact or context.” Keeping to this code of ethics requires that no matter how strongly they believe in a cause or detest some pending action, journalists must seek to present all of the facts and alternatives as accurately and fairly as they can, taking care not to mislead people in order to get them to support their position, but try instead to convince them by the full and free exchange of information and opinion.

Journalists have been described as members of the “fourth estate,” a term usually attributed to Edmund Burke, a British politician commenting on an assembly of the French parliament in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Clergy were in the first estate, nobles in the second, and commoners in the third. Burke, spotting the newspaper reporters sitting in the upper galleries, called them the fourth estate and claimed that they were the most powerful estate of all because of the power they held to shape and sway public opinion. Historically, then, a free press and ethical journalists have been considered essential components of a democracy. Journalists who work ethically recognize the responsibility they have to keep the public informed so that as voters, they can make sound decisions. The genre of the editorial or opinion essay, while it does argue for a particular position, still seeks to accurately report the situation and to provide readers with the kind of information that allows them to make informed decisions.

## Invention

### Choosing a topic

#### The topics out there—

What topics have you heard about lately on the radio, discussed in conversation, or seen in newspaper headlines and homepage netcasts that caught your attention and might be worth pursuing?

Choose one and write down everything you do know about it, and anything you do not know, but would like to know.

Do this until you discover a topic that really interests you. Unless you can generate some interest of your own in a topic, the topic isn't worth pursuing. Bored writers make bored readers.

If you're flailing around for a topic, follow Neely's lead. She regularly scans multiple sources on topics that interest her so that she has a fairly ready supply of topics from which she can draw when it is time to write.

### **The topics in your head–**

Begin with your own interests and see where looking at the disagreements, differences of opinion, or controversies in them can take you.

For example, if you are an avid online gamer, what kinds of regulations are being considered that are going to affect when and how you play? If you really like to eat, do some searching about food, restaurants, grocery stores, or farms. Are there arguments going on in your area about local food versus global impact, native species and genetically engineered foods, or other related concerns.

If you wrote a position paper earlier this term, you might want to take a look at both that paper and the sources you used. Take a look at the topic again and see if anything new is happening on that front.

Sources of happiness and irritation can also be sources of ideas. What makes you really happy? Should there be more of that in the world? Could you write a strong opinion essay about it that would engage readers? What really irritates you? Do you think it might irritate others? Should there be less of that in the world?

### **Opening research**

By now, you likely have a fairly clear idea of what kind of an argument you will make. Review the notes you first wrote about what you needed to know. Have other questions emerged?

- Create a list of every question you have.
- Scratch any that are not closely related to what you intend to write about.
- Cluster your questions into related groups.
- Categorize the clusters by kinds of information you need.
  - Legal?
  - Economic?
  - Scientific?
  - Medical?
  - Technical?

You might want to begin this research by learning more about the general topic by doing a general keyword or subject search on the internet, search or consulting some reference works, such as encyclopedias, just to make sure you understand the basic outline of the debate and the terms being used. You might want to continue to refine your list.

### Focused research

Now, rather than casting a wide net for anything on the topic, write your search queries to answer just those questions you have. The databases at your college library and some selected internet sites should be rich resources for this assignment. The sources below can be especially helpful.

Legal sources:

LexisNexis Academic Universe is a commercial database to which many academic libraries subscribe. It provides access to Congressional records, court verdicts, the Government Printing Office, and many other federal, state, and local sites. If you are using a commercial search engine such as Google and locate material that requires you to subscribe to get it, note the citation information and then see if the same material is available through your university library.

<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/index.html>

Here is what the website says about itself:

"GPO Access is a service of the U.S. Government Printing Office that provides free electronic access to a wealth of important information products produced by the Federal Government. The information provided on this site is the official, published version and the information retrieved from GPO Access can be used without restriction, unless specifically noted. This free service is funded by the Federal Depository Library Program and has grown out of Public Law 103-40, known as the Government Printing Office Electronic Information Enhancement Act of 1993."

<sup>ii</sup><<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/about/index.html>>

<http://gsulaw.gsu.edu/metaindex/>

This website, hosted by Georgia State University law school, has links to multiple government and other legal information sources.

<http://www.fiu.edu/~morriss/lawweb.html>

This website, hosted by Florida International Universities, has links to multiple government legal and legislative sites and civic advocacy sites, including the American Civil Liberties Union. The links it provides are usefully divided into categories.

<http://criminal.findlaw.com/>

Many items at FindLaw are available only to subscribers, but it also provides some very useful publicly-accessible information. The information it provides on criminal law includes definitions of various crimes, the stages of criminal

prosecution, and links to local and state criminal law sources, victim advocacy groups, and other resources describing criminal processes and rights.

#### Economic Sources:

International Financial Statistics is a web browser supported by the International Monetary Fund. It provides financial and monetary data

<http://www.federalreserve.gov/>

This is the official site of the Federal Reserve System, the nation's central bank. The Federal Reserve regulates the nation's banks and moderates the economic climate by controlling various interest rates and the supply of money. The website provides useful information on the state of the national economy, economic research and data, and information for consumers about mortgages, car leasing, credit card debt, and student loans.

<http://www.wto.org/>

The official site of the World Trade Organization has a very useful "Resources" section that includes resources for students, statistical information gathered into useful groups, and rules regarding its relationships with non-governmental organizations that advocate for the development of trade all over the world.

<http://www.intracen.org/>

The website for the international organization that seeks to support trade and economic development in developing countries and those changing from a rural economy to a mixed, industrial, or service economy provides useful information on multiple efforts to provide aid to small businesses worldwide to gain access to global economic opportunities, including links to free trade organizations.

<http://www.census.gov/>

The website for the US Census Bureau is loaded with information that includes economic data about various groups in the US, including median income, the cost of homeownership, who owns homes, and how incomes vary across geographic regions. Bookmark this site.

<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html>

This is a subsection of the larger US Census Bureau website. This site breaks down economic and demographic information by state and county.

<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html>

This is a subsection of the Whitehouse.gov website, a website published by the executive office. This subsection provides lots of useful facts that are easy to read and use, including good summaries of demographic information. (Demographics includes information about various populations categorized by common features such as age, sex, income, race, geographic regions, level of education, or professional field.)

Scientific and medical resources:

<http://www.scirus.com/>

This search engine returns links to hundreds of thousands of scientific publications in almost every discipline, including various medical specialties. The information available includes articles written for all audiences as well as those directed to specialists in the field.

<http://www.nsf.gov/>

The National Science Foundation, founded by Congress more than 50 years ago, is funded by the federal government and is a major source of grants for college and university basic science research projects. The searchable website includes articles of public interest, information on cutting edge research in all areas of science, as well as information for researchers seeking grants.

## **Assignment**

This assignment is designed to help you learn how to collaborate with others to create an opinion essay that is informed by multiple perspectives, and to allow you to demonstrate that you can write a persuasive editorial.

### **Editorial Board**

This assignment asks you to work with classmates as members of an editorial team.

While one editor is usually assigned to write the final draft of an editorial, all of the editors contribute to it. They agree upon a topic, discuss and argue their various points of view, pool their information, and come to an agreement about what position they will support or course of action they will urge. This process is usually reiterative---meaning that they may go through some of the steps two or three times. For example, once they agree upon a topic and begin discussing it, the editors may find that they are disagreeing about facts. They will then take a break, research those facts, and get back together to pool that information before discussing and arguing some more. That discussion may prompt the need for

more information, so they will do more research, and then begin to formulate their position. Even after they have agreed upon their position, the person writing the editorial may discover during the writing process that he or she has to look up some fact and that fact may present new information that the board has to consider to see if that changes position they take. Throughout the process, the board has to stay open to the learning process. This assignment is designed to support that kind of open and collaborative learning process.

## Task

The editorial board has been assigned to write a 750 word editorial on an issue of significance for members of either the campus community or for the city in which the college resides.

First editorial board meeting:

Members of the group should assume the following roles. (If your group is larger or smaller than the roles listed, members will have to share tasks or perform two or more roles.)

Leader---the leader's job is to initiate the discussion, propose possible topics, and keep everyone on task.

Facilitator--the facilitator's job is to ensure that everyone has a chance to participate and that everyone's point of view is heard. This may require reminding other members not to interrupt, asking someone to repeat what they said so everyone can hear or to restate their point so that everyone can understand.

Recorder--the recorder's job is to create a record of the conversation, including noting all agreements, decisions, and task assignments. The record is consulted when any member of the board forgets an important point or when a dispute arises about who was supposed to do what.

Purpose: Discover an issue worth writing about.

The discussion should begin with a free-ranging conversation so that members all have a chance to pool their information or to at least suggest where they might find information about interesting topics. Members might begin by discussing issues their various smaller communities are facing. Are commuter students having trouble getting parking? Are on campus students unable to access pharmacies late at night? Is the state considering yet another cut in funding to universities?

Members should agree on one or two topics and then take careful note of what they already know. This is the moment for the braindump. Contributors should note if the information and ideas they are offering are speculative, as in, "I think I

heard my RA say that new insurance policies are going into effect that means that we will have get rid of all coffee pots and electric grills.” They should also note if they evidence for a possible issue, as in “I just got a written notice that any student who has an outstanding tuition bill ten days before the new term bill be deregistered! Last term we had until three days before the new term.”

Once students have identified what they do know, they should create a list of questions they need to answer before the next meeting. This would include confirming or disproving any speculative contributions. Each member should leave the meeting with a research assignment.

Second editorial meeting:

Purpose: Pool information and assess the rhetorical situation.

This meeting should begin with students pooling the information they have gathered, comparing it to the list of questions they prepared. Any holes in the research should be noted and assigned to a member for further research.

Once the information has been pooled, the group should describe and assess the rhetorical situation using the assessment questions outlined earlier in this chapter. The recorder should note the answers and provide a transcript for the group after the meeting. If your class has discussion boards available for groups, this transcript might be posted on your group’s board. The transcript of this meeting will the document the group uses at the opening of the next meeting.

Third editorial meeting:

Purpose: Draft the editorial

The editorial board should now be ready to write, identifying the position they want to take or course of action they want to urge. Using the assessment transcript, the group should identify strong forms of evidence it can bring into the editorial as well as using the identification of shared values and beliefs to build lines of reasoning that will be persuasive to their audience. The group should produce a rough outline that orders the evidence and the reasoning.

Members may now decide to break the writing task into chunks, with each member assigned a section of the rough outline, or to have one member write a first draft and circulate it before the next meeting. Members not assigned to write will perform fact checking and revision for the final draft.

The board may also choose to have each member write a draft. The final meeting can then be used to peer review all drafts, and create a final draft out of the strongest aspects of each.

Fourth and final meeting:

Purpose: Revise and submit the final draft.

Members should now read all drafts, using the transcript of the rhetorical situation to assure that all points are covered and using the description of the genre to assure that the editorial meets all genre expectations of readers.

### Peer Review

Trade papers between groups, and use the following questions to guide your response.

#### Genre moves

Does the headline accurately reflect the issue and position taken?

Does the opening line grab the reader's attention?

Is the issue and the board's position or course of action revealed to the reader by the end of the paragraph?

Do the succeeding paragraphs provide logical support for the board's position?

Do the succeeding paragraphs make appeals to shared values and beliefs that will motivate readers?

Are negative consequences of alternatives noted without exaggeration?

Does the conclusion provide clear direction for the reader?

#### Language use

- Third person?
- Active voice?
- Standard English?
- Strong verbs?

#### Design features:

- Short paragraphs?
- Meets length requirement?

Following assessment, the board should write a final draft and submit.

## Reflection

What part of this process was difficult for me? What made it difficult? Lack of information? Motivation? Emotional resistance? Reluctance to work with others?

What part of this process was easy for me? What made it easy? A wealth of information? Investment in the issue? Pleasure in working with others?

What did I learn from this process about myself? About other people? About how to go about writing an editorial?

What can I do now that I could not do or what can I now do better than I could before now that I have written an editorial essay? What did I learn? How might I use this learning in the future? What connections can I make between what I have learned here and other work that I am currently pursuing?

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<sup>i</sup> Society of Professional Journalists. "Code of Ethics." 18 August 2007. <<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>>

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Government Printing Office. "GPO Access." 14 August 2007 <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/about/index.html>