

Innovations in written expression: The “op-ed” policy analysis assignment as a lesson in tightened argumentation, balanced advocacy and praxis epistemology

This presentation concerns a **short-essay assignment**. Written expression through a 1000-word “op-ed” for newspapers provides lessons in tightened argumentation, balanced advocacy, popular introduction of theoretically-derived ideas, and praxis epistemology.

What is it about **the role of a public intellectual in an extremely conflictual society**, that students can begin to appreciate, via even this sort of short essay assignment? How might such a role be practiced - and also help **produce knowledge** - in the form of a brief article for newspapers, specifically aimed at **addressing the social theory problems raised in this course?**

This exercise helps explore interfaces of **research, advocacy and creative written expression**, drawing upon a dozen writing (and assessment) tips.

This essay is *not* to be written with formal referencing, as you would in an academic paper. It’s meant to help you **address a popular audience with sophisticated but readily-comprehensible analysis**. Within course parameters (especially the five case study areas), the topic and title are your choice.

The non-negotiable deadline is 29 March, 8am.

Assignment 2

Short Essay – 30% of final mark

The assignment is an **opinion-editorial essay of no less than 800 and no more than 1000 words**, on some aspect of governance relevant to our course.

An ‘op-ed’ – usually placed in a newspaper ‘opposite the editorial page’ – is a **brief but nuanced argument, meant to persuade**. (*Excessively preachy and moralistic argumentation is often a turn-off to readers.*)

Compressing a complex narrative into an essay is a very useful exercise. Think carefully about your **readers’ perspective, what they know and don’t know, and how you might persuade them** to take your point of view seriously.

A dozen tips for Assignment 2

- **Which publication** are you writing for? Specify the periodical for me (above your title), and if it is obscure, explain who the audience is.
- Expect to have ***substantial*** edits from a tough-love editor, to **tighten the wording and especially rid your article of superfluous material.**
- Try to start your article with a **punchy, attention-grabbing idea.** Consider using a quotation that carries wisdom or controversy, and/or alerting readers to your underlying theoretical, philosophical or ethical stance.
- Ensure the article addresses a **topical issue that the reader will be interested in understanding, from your point of view.**
- Use **quotations from people 'in authority'** as much as possible. The reasons for quoting people include their standing in society (whether they are elites or grassroots people), their quotability (especially if they give you a wonderful 'sound-bite'), or their articulation of an idea you want to put across. When you quote someone, give the reader an intro so that s/he knows why. Try to limit the quote to two sentences.
- Use **statistics as much as is appropriate** (don't overload, but definitely demonstrate that you are aware of concrete facts).

A dozen tips for Assignment 2 (cont.)

- **Appear balanced**; indeed, try to anticipate **what an opponent might argue and acknowledge that with respect**, and be ready with an **implicit or explicit rebuttal**.
 - Use interesting **metaphors or other creative writing tools** so that the article flows well. Don't get bogged down in minutia.
 - The most common problem is repetitiveness; **write tight, have 1-2 sentence paragraphs, and compress phrases for maximum efficiency**.
 - Try to end with a **punch-line argument**, whether it is witty or thought-provoking.
 - Some newspapers allow 1000 (or more) words, but you are more likely to have an article published if it is **800 words**.
 - Provide a **good ID note** about yourself (can include UJ status).
- If you succeed in publishing your article, you receive a 5% bonus.*