

A Few Tips for Opinion Piece Writers **Andrew Leigh**

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In Australia, opinion pieces are more important than they probably should be. Lacking broad-based expert-written policy magazines like the *New Republic*, *Atlantic Monthly* or *Spectator*, much of the discussion about ideas in Australia occurs on our opinion pages.¹ And there isn't much space for it. We have five broadsheets in Australia: the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Age*, *Australian*, *Canberra Times* and the *Australian Financial Review* (the last a tabloid-sized broadsheet). Given that most have their own regular columnists, this means only about five to ten places for new voices each day.

There are two implications of this. First, if you have something to say that's of interest to a generalist audience, it's worth trying to write an opinion piece and get it placed. While academic articles are important, most will only be read by a few thousand people. The same goes for online journals. By contrast, the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* have a circulation of over 200,000. Second, there is a lot of competition for Australia's limited opinion page territory, so you will need to be persistent, and may need to send it to more than one paper before it gets a run.

What follows was originally written as the basis for a training session that I conducted in 2004 for [OzProspect fellows](#), a talented bunch of young Aussies who are working to get their ideas into the public domain. A couple of people afterwards expressed interest in a document that aimed to demystify the opinion piece game. In 2008, after speaking to an ANU masterclass on opinion pieces run by the talented [Brooke Kroeger](#), I updated it a little.

I can't claim to be an expert on this. But over the past decade, I've had nearly 100 opinion pieces published, so I guess I know something about how the process works. I also passionately believe that Australia needs new voices in the public domain. Not just younger voices (though as Mark Davis has shown, there's a [strong argument](#) for that), but a greater diversity of perspectives and ideas, from people who've never been heard from before.

1. How to write an opinion piece

(a) The first paragraph

The first paragraph of an opinion piece should catch the reader's eye. You must signal that your topic is an interesting one, and you have something novel to say about it. Your model should be the opening paragraph of a good short story, not the beginning of an academic essay. Link your idea into the week's big stories if you can.

(b) Structure

Your reader should have a general idea of where you are going – but you don't need a roadmap at the outset. We need to know in the first paragraph that you are writing

¹ In Australia, ideas magazines such as the *Monthly*, the *Quarterly Essay*, and the *Diplomat* are quite good. But they lack the breadth and readership of their US/UK counterparts (something that is mostly a function of our relatively small population).

about why we should ban political donations, but not that you will give us two arguments and two examples.

(c) Content

There are many different styles for opinion pieces (personal story, background to the news, statement on where an important person stands on an issue). But the style of opinion piece that I know best is a write-up of academic research. In this, I have a few simple rules:

- If you are writing up your own research, there should be a paper or book available for others to look at. Ideally, this should be online, but at a minimum you should have it available to email to people who write to you. Don't write an oped about the research paper you're going to release next year.
- Don't succumb to the temptation to go outside your area of expertise. If you write pap on things you know nothing about, you are doing a disservice to yourself, and your discipline.
- Look for pieces of research that can be combined. A meaty piece of research can sustain a full article on its own, but otherwise you might consider discussing 2-3 pieces of new research.
- If you are critiquing another academic's work, it is good practice to send them a copy of the piece before it appears in print. Ideally, this should be done with enough time to allow them to point out any factual errors to you.

(d) Humour

Opinion writing is half entertaining, half informing. A delicious word out of place, or a clever turn of phrase, will work wonders to keep your reader going – and absorbing your argument. As my friend Michael Fullilove puts it, substance requires form. Here's a trio of examples that I think worked well.

- **Paul Krugman (*New York Times*):**
When the members of the appeals court were writing up their ruling on Microsoft, did an animated paper clip pop up on their screen, bat its eyelashes and say: "You seem to be writing a legal opinion. Would you like some help?" Actually, we could all use some help here: the Microsoft case is fundamentally difficult....
- **David Burchell (*The Australian*):**
Labor strategists are no doubt crestfallen that their lovingly crafted tax and family income policies – aimed at suburban mums unable to get back into the workforce – sank without trace. Medicare Gold conspicuously failed to go platinum. The only Labor policy which bit was the symbolic effort of clawing back a few bucks from the very richest private schools to spread around all the others in penny-packets. Latham as a pantomime Robin Hood.
- **Greg Craven (*Sydney Morning Herald*):**
Of all the topics likely to clear an Australian barbecue, federalism is the most pungent. In terms of grinding dullness, it ranks with Mark Latham's autobiographical monologue. It therefore is a tribute to the sheer cussedness of Premier Bob Carr that our own constitutional "F" word is now on everybody's lips.
... One of the biggest problems with Australian federalism is that it often is seen as an historical anachronism, like steam trains and Phillip Adams.
(NB. You probably want to be pretty relaxed about making enemies if you take this route)

(e) Disclosures

If you have a personal interest, it should be disclosed, and can be done concisely, eg. I once wrote “One option would be for universities to follow the lead of the University of Technology, Sydney, which offers a bachelor of international studies that incorporates a full year at an overseas university (disclosure: my mother works with this program).” In general, you don’t need to disclose membership of a political party when writing about politics, unless you’re writing during an election season.

(f) Length

700 words good. 500 words better. 800 words is about the maximum non-columnists are given. Be concise. Even if you don’t like its politics, the *Economist* is a marvellous example of how to convey a lot in very few words. Someone once described their writing as being as dense as a freeze dried meal – add water to a 500-word *Economist* article, and it would swell up to be a 3000-word article in most other newspapers or magazines.

(g) Byline

Your article should conclude with a one-sentence description of who you are. My standard byline is “Dr Andrew Leigh is an economist at the Research School of Social Sciences in the Australian National University”. Newspapers will not normally be willing to publish your website and/or email address, as they want to channel feedback to their letters page/website.

2. How to place an opinion piece

(a) Which newspaper?

A natural way to write an opinion piece is to “hook” it to a top story in that day’s paper. But in some cases, you may be writing about a theme that is in all the newspapers. In this case, how you choose which paper to send to really depends on your personal tastes. Don’t worry too much about the ideology of the paper. There is a little bit of this in Australia, but not enough to worry about. For example, although the *Australian’s* opinion page is typically more conservative than the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* opinion page, the lead-up to the Iraq war saw the *Australian* run anti-war opinion pieces, and the *Herald* run pro-war opinion pieces.

To find out the contact details of the opinion page editor, call the newspaper’s switchboard. Fairfax Sydney: 02 9288 2822, Fairfax Melbourne: 03 9600 4211, News Limited Sydney: 02 9288 3000, Canberra Times: 02 6280 2122, Courier Mail: 1300 304 020, Herald Sun: 03 9292 1226. Ask for the opinion page editor. If you get his or her answering machine, have a pen in hand; the message will generally include their email address.

Don’t confine yourself to the broadsheets. Some tabloids – notably the *Herald Sun* and *Courier Mail* – are apparently keen to attract contributors. The ratio of potential readers to competing contributors is probably highest in the tabloids.

(b) Pitching

Once you get to know an opinion editor, you can “pitch” a story. This means calling or emailing the editor in the morning (10am-noon), with an idea that links to that

day's news. They will generally say no, but if they say "yes", then you have a near-guarantee that they will run your piece.

You can also pitch a story to an editor you don't know. If you do this, it is generally helpful to provide a few sentences about your expertise. Also, if you are pitching by email, remember that the editor will be asking themselves "can this person write?". So double-check your email for typographical errors and grammatical infelicities before you hit Send.

(c) The Follow-Up Dance

Opinion page editors in Australia are a busy lot. Every day, they have to solicit or select the articles for the next day's paper and edit them into shape by about 6pm. Through no fault of their own, they're often unable to respond to all the mail in their inbox. This means that if you haven't heard back after a day or two, it's as likely to mean that the editor hasn't read your piece than that s/he read it and hated it. In my experience, it's fine to politely follow up, without being pushy.

In my case, after writing an opinion piece, the process usually goes like this:

- i. Send the article to the opinion editor of paper #1. The email has a one-paragraph summary of the article, a one-sentence description of me (if this is the first time I've sent it to them), and my mobile phone number. Attached to the email is a Microsoft Word version of the opinion piece, which is also pasted at the bottom of the email – so if they're busy, they can simply scroll down.
- ii. Wait for 1-2 days.
- iii. Send a follow-up email or call the opinion editor of paper #1
- iv. If you get a rejection, or surmise that the editor isn't interested, it's ok to move on to another paper. If you've received no response to your first two emails, then the best thing to do is to drop another email to the opinion page editor, politely saying that you're now submitting the piece elsewhere.
- v. Send the article to the opinion editor of paper #2.
- vi. Repeat steps (ii) to (v) until article is finally placed in a paper.

My record number of rejections for a single opinion piece is six (*Sydney Morning Herald*, *Australian*, *Age*, *Australian Financial Review*, *Canberra Times*, *Courier Mail*). The piece was eventually published in the *West Australian*. This was clearly overkill on my part – not to mention a trifle humiliating – but I tell the story to illustrate that you needn't give up after the first rejection. In general, it is not unusual for me to spend more time placing a piece than writing it.

Never send an opinion piece to two papers simultaneously.

Don't spend any time worrying about your heading – the newspaper will never use it. In fact, when I look at draft opinion pieces written by friends, I can often make the simple suggestion that they take their headline and work it into a closing line.

If you're writing about different topics at the same time, then in the unlikely event that two papers want to run different opinion pieces from you on the same day, make sure both opinion editors know beforehand. One or both will often want to pull the piece.

3. Next steps

(a) What if the piece doesn't make the papers?

Four terrific internet journals that accept contributions are www.apo.org.au, www.onlineopinion.com.au, www.newmatilda.com and www.australianprospect.com.au. Their readerships are smaller than the newspapers, but still quite large. For example, *Online Opinion* claims 150,000 individual IPs per month. In addition, they tend to be a good way to reach policy wonks.² Note that *New Matilda* and *Australian Prospect* require readers to pay in order to view some of their articles.

Alternatively, if you are a regular blog reader, you might want to send it to your favourite blogger, and ask him/her to publish it. This way you will get between several hundred and several thousand readers, and most likely elicit some feisty feedback.

(b) What if the piece does make the papers?

In this case, you should ask – nicely – whether you can get paid for it. On the day that it comes out, write a nice email to the opinion editor, thanking him or her for running it, and asking whether they pay for contributions. If the answer is yes, then send your postal address and bank details in order to deposit the payment. Some papers pay 50 cents a word; some have a flat rate; others don't pay unsolicited contributors at all. Don't get miffed if you don't get paid – no-one ever got rich writing opinion pieces.

4. Columns

After writing over 80 freelance opinion columns in the years 1999-2006, the Australian Financial Review was generous enough to give me a monthly column in 2007, which became a fortnightly column in 2008. I'm still new at the columnists' game, but I can say that it's very pleasant to be assured of a regular spot on the page. The way it works for me is that a few days before I am scheduled to file, I pitch 3-4 ideas to the editors, who tell me which one they would like me to write.

When I got the gig, the AFR's other academic economist columnist, John Quiggin, advised me that I ought to be scrupulous about filing on time and at the right word length. Since the supply of would-be opinion columnists will always exceed the demand for them, I regard this as very sensible advice.

May your words flow fluidly, and your pitches find their mark.

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² Susan Prior, editor of *Online Opinion*, makes three further arguments in favour of her publication: (1) OLO actively encourages new writers to send in material; (2) Each piece is judged as it stands and not by who wrote it (I have also referred some young writers to old hands to mentor them if I feel their ideas are good enough but the text isn't up to scratch); and (3) We publish six op-eds every weekday.