



**That's my  
OPINION**

# *Opinion Writing*

## *Table of Contents*

**LESSON ONE:** Choosing a Topic & Ethics, pg. 2

**LESSON TWO:** Writing Strong Arguments, pg. 7

**LESSON THREE:** Background, Stance & Body, pg. 10

**LESSON FOUR:** Refuting the Opposition, pg. 13

**LESSON FIVE:** Calling to Action, pg. 16

Stephen Green created these lessons as a capstone project for completion of the journalism educator master's degree program at Kent State University. It may be reproduced only for individual classroom teachers in class, but not for any commercial purposes including derivative works.

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### Rationale

Writing an opinion is more than putting personal thoughts on paper and calling it a day. Journalists have a duty to uphold and a powerful platform not to misuse. Knowing what kinds of topics to choose and ethical responsibilities not only achieves those goals, but also makes the opinion articles stronger.

**CLASS GOAL:** We will learn ways to think about choosing a topic for an opinion article and ethical responsibilities that come with opinion writing.

**INDIVIDUAL GOAL:** I will choose a topic based on these criteria and consider the ethical questions for my topic.

### Goals for Understanding

Students will understand & demonstrate

- Reporters should choose topics they have a fresh angle on — the more local the better — particularly about practices and policies they feel should change
- They should choose topics they feel passionate about and are knowledgeable of
- They have a duty to research the topic, and be accurate and clear
- They must be fair in their criticism and understand what expectations their target should be meeting
- And they should not cherry pick arguments to support their case, but face the realities of their stance head on.

### Overview & Timeline

This lesson is designed to be completed in two, 45-minute class periods with students split into groups of four, but may be completed in one depending on class length.

Lesson includes

- Warm up activity/preactivity assessment
- Direct instruction
- Cooperative learning activity
- Closing/post-activity assessment

### Materials Needed

- "Opinion Topic Worksheet" for each student
- "Choosing a Topic Instructional Sheets" for each group
- "Ethics in Opinion Instructional Sheets" for each group
- "Ethics in Opinion Exit Ticket" for each student

### Day 1

**WARM UP ACTIVITY:** Show Slides 2 & 3 of the slideshow and have students individually complete the activity with a 2-minute time limit. Then, direct students to go around their group explaining and justifying each of their results using the round-robin method for 20 seconds per student. Use a timer application or website to show the students how much time is left. Audibly signal when it is time to switch group members and ensure everyone is talking. Slide 4 has the example version the teacher can use to preview the lesson.

**INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Have each group member pull one of the four "Choosing a Topic Instructional Cards" and read to themselves for 1-2 minutes. Then, have each student spend 30 seconds explaining to the group members the different concepts they learned.

Show students Slide 5, which has a topic they will use to think about opinion articles. First, have students think about their opinion on the topic for 1 minute in silence. Tell them to think about their strongest reasons why they agree/disagree with the statement. Then, have students go in a round-robin format with each student answering question 1, starting with the tallest person in the group. Then, the next tallest will start question 2 and so forth until all four questions are answered.

Lead a class discussion on those questions to see how the groups answered. They should be on the right track, even if not perfect in their reasoning.

Now, explain students will be writing an opinion article of their choice. Hand each student the "Opinion Topic Worksheet." They should complete these individually.

Slide 6 has a recap of concepts they should have learned.

**EXIT TICKET/CLOSING ACTIVITY:** Have each group go in a round robin starting with the person who yawned last (just for fun) and discuss the hardest part about filling out the worksheet, then come to a group consensus and post it somewhere that all groups can see the other responses. Then, turn in their worksheet.

### Day 2

**WARM UP ACTIVITY:** Have students discuss the topic they picked with their group in a round-robin format, explaining why they think (some) students at their school would care about the topic. Then, show them the topic on Slide 7.

Have students perform a mix-pair-share activity: Students will think about their answer, mix around the room, and randomly pair (at teacher preference how this happens) with a student. They will discuss the two questions on Slide 7. Then return to their seat.

**INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Have each group member pull one of the four "Ethics in Opinion Instructional Cards" and read to themselves for 1-2 minutes. Then, have each student spend 30 seconds explaining to the other group members.

Have each group assign the four ethical questions to a different group member. Then, have students write down (in the method preferred by the teacher) an example of how someone may violate that ethical rule in an opinion column. You will do this as a numbered heads together activity where after the group is finished, they should compare answers and make sure each one has written their answer correctly and revise as needed. Then, the teacher will randomly call a group and one of the four ethical questions. That student will have to explain their scenario and why it violates ethical rules.

**NOTE:** Some students may want to revise their opinion topic after the discussion.

**EXIT TICKET/CLOSING ACTIVITY:** Have students read and complete the "Ethics in Opinion Exit Ticket."

### References

- Etwell, J., Balmeo, M., Austin, E., & Hamm R. (2021). *Journalism: Publishing Across Media*. The Goodheart-Willcox Company.
- Fink, C. C. (2004). *Writing Opinion for Impact*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Hawthorne, B. (2019). *The Radical Write*. Jostens.
- Kanigel, R. (2012). *The Student Newspaper Survival Guide*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Stovall, J. (2009). *Writing for the Mass Media*. Pearson.
- Strunk, W., & White, E. (2000). *The Elements of Style*. Allyn & Bacon.
- Harrower, T. (2013). *Inside Reporting: A Practical Guide to the Craft of Journalism*. McGraw-Hill.

## *What Can You Add?*

### CHOOSING A TOPIC

### *Personal Connection*

When choosing an opinion topic, think about your own life experiences. Topics close to you, situations your friends and family experience, and what you have gone through all give you a unique voice in the matter. People who have been hit by a drunk driver know the issue firsthand compared to someone who has not.

### *Know Thyself*

Sometimes what you add is done for the wrong reasons. Don't choose a topic simply because it benefits you, because the target of your opinion "deserves it," or because you want to stir up drama.

Understand your motivations for writing. It should always be for some greater good.

### *Think About It!*

What topics do you have a personal connection to? What opinions could you add to the discussion over that?

## *What's Been Said?*

### CHOOSING A TOPIC

### *Don't Be a Parrot*

It is tempting to write about national or international news coverage. You hear it from family and friends; you probably have valid opinions. However, you are throwing just one more opinion on a mountain of others who probably already said the same ideas with better resources. Instead, choose a fresh angle or a new idea.

### *Local is Best*

An easy way to pick a topic of fresh discussion is to stick local. Issues going on at your school or community have more impact because more people care and let you be one of the leading voices in the discussion. This also is a way to discuss national topics by finding that local angle.

### *Think About It!*

If the U.S. Department of Education started a new rule requiring all states to have a standardized test for every subject including electives, what would be your local approach to an opinion?

## *What's Needs Changed?*

### CHOOSING A TOPIC

### *Make It Happen*

The goal of an opinion piece should never be "because we need one" or "because I need the grade." Sure, that might be a plus, but the bigger picture is about being useful. Editorial pages serve as a voice for your readers to those in power. An article you write "just because" has as much power as those you care about.

### *If I Could...*

When you are considering a topic, think about what you would change if you could snap your fingers and make it happen. What would you change that would make the lives of other people better off? That is the purpose of most opinion articles: reviews help you make product choices; others help through exposure or advocacy.

### *Think About It!*

At your school, what is one thing you would change that would genuinely make the lives of students, faculty or staff better? Avoid trivial topics and focus on the actual problems, even if they may seem small to you.

## *What Do You Care & Know About?*

### CHOOSING A TOPIC

### *Write With Passion*

What are you angry about? What brings you joy? What gets you excited when you talk? What are the topics that make your heart rate jump just because you get to intellectually wrestle another person?

Those are what you should consider when picking what to write. People can feel boredom or sterile, just-because writing.

### *Write With Knowledge*

In Thomas Hobbes' "Leviathan", he writes "knowledge is power." If you want to write powerful opinion articles, you cannot wander into a hot topic unprepared. It is better to start with topics you are already familiar with. Otherwise, the research process will take even longer and you may make unintentionally horrid arguments.

### *Think About It!*

What are topics you are passionate about?

## *Be an Expert*

ETHICS IN OPINION

### *Do Some Research*

Just because you are writing an opinion article does not give you any less reason to be a reporter. In fact, the opposite is true. Not only are you supposed to be providing your opinion, you are supposed to be providing them based in reality.

Writing an article full of old, inaccurate or misleading data leads to losing respect.

### *Different Expertises*

Being an expert doesn't mean you have to hold a doctoral degree or work 30 years in a field, it just means you know what you're talking about through any means.

You could be an expert on punk rock, Asian food, African American culture, school board policy, or animal shelters because you know it well.

### *Think About It!*

What do you consider yourself an expert in or have in-depth knowledge about? Why would you consider yourself to have expertise in that area?

## *Be Accurate*

ETHICS IN OPINION

### *Swing Hard*

Writing an opinion piece is all about being firm and confident in your opinion. Being wishy washy about your stance can be frustrating as a reader, who just wants to know how you feel.

This means you must be accurate and clear about what you are arguing. If it is confusing, readers will bail.

### *Cut Deep*

If you're going to swing hard (have a strong opinion), you need to go deeper than the surface level arguments. This means diving into the underlying issues. These can sometimes be unclear.

Doing your research more than scanning a Wikipedia entry or the first page of Google will go a long way in helping this.

### *Don't Miss*

Importantly, if your goal is to swing hard and cut deep, you can't have bad facts.

Imagine a student screaming in the cafeteria about another student having a dog on campus and how he was punished for bringing an animal before. Then the kid who brought the dog saying, "She's my service dog for my seizure condition." While was passionate, he was wrong.

## *Be Fair*

ETHICS IN OPINION

### *Fair Expectations*

When writing a criticism, keep in mind what should be expected from your target. Don't accuse the principal of being abusive of power for doing something the superintendent forced them to do. Don't criticize the theater's production by comparing to a Broadway version. Don't pick on a first-year sport for not winning.

### *Fair Requests*

In any opinion piece, the author should make some sort of call to action or request from someone to do something.

Keep these reasonable. It wouldn't be reasonable for the cafeteria to convert to only food trucks. It is a reasonable request to ask schools to invite a food truck for students occasionally. Be realistic.

### *Is This Fair?*

The principal should do more to help school spirit. Her focus should primarily be on making students happy and feeling engaged. More students would feel that way if they let us leave class when we want if we need a break.

## *Don't Cherry Pick*

ETHICS IN OPINION

### *Face Reality Head On*

Every topic out there has pros and cons. If, as a columnist, you can't pretend your idea has no problems. The more contentious the topic, the more people will see you clearly avoiding problems with your position. Instead, it is much more convincing when readers see you address or even embrace problems without fear.

### *Don't Mess with Fact*

If 100 studies exist on your issue and 99 say they support A, don't pick the one study that supports B. Doing this does a disservice to the reader and your responsibility as a journalist.

If your research or interviews can't find many good reasons to support your view, don't pretend otherwise.

### *What's the Problem?*

Evidence shows newspapers are not in any danger of collapsing. A study from the 1977 edition of Journalism Quarterly shows the majority of Americans still get their news from daily newspapers.

# Opinion Topic Worksheet

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

## Instructions

Use the worksheet below to help guide you to an opinion topic that you will eventually write about for the publication. Take it seriously because this topic will follow into future lessons. You will write a full opinion article about the issue you choose.

## Topic Options

WRITE ALL FOUR, THEN PICK ONE TO USE ON THE REST OF THE WORKSHEET.

### *Sports*

What topic in the sport you most closely follow is currently being debated?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *Current Events*

What in the news today is being debated you care most about?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *Entertainment/Pop Culture*

What in the pop culture industry is debated right now and you care about?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *School*

What is currently being debated about your school by students or staff?

\_\_\_\_\_

## Localize & Personalize It

### *It Is Local Because...*

The more local the better. How does your story relate to your school?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *People Here Care Because...*

Why should or do your readers care about this particular topic?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *I Can Add New Discussion By...*

What perspective can you bring not recently PUBLISHED by others?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *I Am Knowledgeable Because...*

What makes you somewhat of an expert on this topic?

\_\_\_\_\_

## Think About the Goal

### *What I May Want Changed Is...*

What about your topic might you ask for something to change?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *What I Want Authorities To Know Is...*

What would you tell the people in power in control of your topic?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *What I Want Readers to Know Is...*

What do readers not know that you will inform them about?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *The Talking Points I'm Avoiding Are...*

What is the argument already debated to death on this topic?

\_\_\_\_\_

## Think About the Other Side

### *My Biggest Feelings About This Are...*

What is your personal biggest reason for your position on this topic?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *People Who Disagree With Me Say...*

What is the big objection to your position by the people you disagree with?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *The Expectations People Have Are...*

What expectations are you holding the subject of your article to?

\_\_\_\_\_

### *My Expectations Are Fair Because...*

Why should your target be able to meet those expectations and aren't?

\_\_\_\_\_

## *Ethics in Opinion Exit Ticket*

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

### *Theater heads 'Into the Dumpster'*

Social media was hyped with reviews of theater's performance of "Into the Woods" — the first musical in school history. Unfortunately it was also my first theater show to watch. It should be thrown "Into the Trash".

The lead actor, freshman Jacob Jingle, had never taken a theater or choir class before and, man, did it show. Jingle was making himself out to look like an absolute fool. He could sing and dance, sure. He tripped over the first lines in the whole performance, which automatically put me off.

The scenery was a disaster. Instead of buying new props, they just repainted and repurposed old sets. They have a \$2,000 for Pete's sake. I could do a lot with that much. Where did that money go?

Mine went down the toilet. If you care about high-quality theater, don't go.

### *Analyze It!*

Write and explain at least two ethical issues with this critical review.

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### Rationale

Opinion writing is, at its core, about persuasion. There's no point in writing a piece only meant to be read by people who already agree with you. This means your arguments have to be strong enough to convince someone to switch their beliefs or for them to understand your position in more depth than before. To do so, you need to know what parts arguments need.

**CLASS GOAL:** We will learn the proper parts of a strong argument.

**INDIVIDUAL GOAL:** I will create a strong argument using a topic I previously chose.

### Goals for Understanding

Students will understand & demonstrate

- All arguments need a claim, warrant and impact
- Claims are the main idea the argument is trying to get across
- Warrants are the logical or evidence-based reasons the claim is true
- Impacts are why the reader should care if the claim is true
- And without just one, the argument becomes incredibly weak

### Overview & Timeline

This lesson is designed to be completed in one, 45-minute class periods with students split into groups of four.

Lesson includes

- Warm up activity/preactivity assessment
- Direct instruction
- Cooperative learning activity
- Closing/post-activity assessment

### Materials Needed

- "Writing Strong Arguments Instructional Sheets" for each group
- Lots of index cards, sticky notes, or other small slips of paper that students will use for the activity
- "Writing Strong Arguments Exit Ticket" for each student

### Day 1

**WARM UP ACTIVITY:** Show Slides 2 & 3 of the slideshow and have students individually complete the activity with a 2-minute time limit. Then, direct students to go around their group explaining and justifying each of their results using the round-robin method for 20 seconds per student. Use a timer application or website to show the students how much time is left. Audibly signal when it is time to switch group members and ensure everyone is talking. Slide 4 has the example version the teacher can use to preview the lesson.

**INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Have each group member pull one of the four "Writing Strong Arguments Instructional Cards" and read to themselves for 1-2 minutes. Then, have each student spend 30 seconds explaining to the group members the different concepts they learned.

Show students Slide 5 and explain they will be doing a practice version of the next activity to make sure everyone understands the structure of a strong argument. Have each student write down (in method preferred by teacher) a claim (reason) they agree with the statement on Slide 5. In this case, tell them they must agree with the statement for now. Then, have them pass their claim to another group member. Each should read and provide a warrant (evidence or logic the claim is true). Pass again. The groups should now add an impact (if the claim is true, why does it matter?).

Now, pass out the sticky notes/index cards/small slips of paper. Each group may need several. Explain that each group will be attempting to come up with as many unique arguments for or against the statement on Slide 6 (don't show them yet). Then tell that the group will have 5 minutes to come up with as many claims as possible based on the topic. Once a group member has written a claim, they should toss it into the middle of the table. Students are allowed to help each other if they are confused on wording or facts.

Put 5 minutes on a timer and begin. Really encourage and drive the competition aspect of it. Stop them when time is up. Have the groups count the number of UNIQUE claims. Write it on the board.

Now, tell the teams they have 10 minutes to write a warrant underneath the claim. Remind them it can be logical or evidence (from memory is OK for this). They cannot write the warrant on a claim they wrote.

Finally, give students 5 minutes to write as many impacts in the same fashion. Once they are complete, they should count the number of arguments with all three parts.

Write that number on the board. In a twist, have students trade with another group. The groups will now check the logic and completeness of the other group's work. Have a brief talk about fairness. If the argument is complete, it should count.

The group may disqualify the argument if:

- It makes absolutely no sense or is complete gibberish.
- The claim is a fact, not an argument.
- The warrant does not prove the claim is true logically or factually.
- The impact does not answer the question "So what? Why does it matter if the claim is true?"
- Any part is factually incorrect, redundant (of another argument), or repetitive (within the argument).

Slide 7 has a recap of concepts.

**EXIT TICKET/CLOSING ACTIVITY:** Have all students complete the "Writing Strong Arguments Exit Ticket".

### References

- Etwell, J., Balmeo, M., Austin, E., & Hamm R. (2021). *Journalism: Publishing Across Media*. The Goodheart-Willcox Company.
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- Strunk, W., & White, E. (2000). *The Elements of Style*. Allyn & Bacon.

# Structure of an Argument

## WRITING STRONG ARGUMENTS

### Three Parts

Every argument should have three parts: a claim that is the summary of that argument, a warrant that proves the claim true, and an impact statement that shows why the claim matters if the warrant proves it true.

If there's no claim, readers get confused what you are talking about. No warrant means no proof what you say is true. No impact means I don't understand why what you are arguing is important.

### Bad Models

*The man is guilty of murder. The evidence indisputable and beyond a reasonable doubt.*

*There are witnesses to the crime, his fingerprints are on the weapon and was caught running away covered in blood. The evidence indisputable and beyond a reasonable doubt.*

*The man is guilty of murder. There are witnesses to the crime, his fingerprints are on the weapon and was caught running away covered in blood.*

### Best Model

**Claim:** Obviously the man is guilty of murder. **Warrant:** There are witnesses to the crime, his fingerprints are on the weapon and was caught running away covered in blood. **Impact:** The evidence is indisputable and beyond a reasonable doubt.

People might be able to piece this together in the other models, but this has all the parts to explain it out for readers.

# Claim: Summary of Argument

## WRITING STRONG ARGUMENTS

### First of All

When you are in an argument with someone, the first statement you make is usually a claim. You are setting up the bigger argument about to come next.

Claims are the main point of the argument and what you are trying to get people to understand when they read your work.

### They Need Help

Claims can't exist alone. You can't just run around yelling arguments at people without proving your point or explaining why it matters.

Claims are, however, important. They help introduce the idea you are about to convey to them, so the next parts make sense.

### Models

*Batman is the best superhero.*

*President Pearl Gower is the best candidate on this issue.*

*The policy prevents students from adequate freedom of expression.*

# Warrant: What's the Proof?

## WRITING STRONG ARGUMENTS

### Where's the Beef?

Warrants are what most students call evidence. While the warrant can be hard evidence, data, studies or other written proof, they can also be logical or common sense connecting the dots.

Without warrants, there is no reason for a reader to believe you. You have to have it.

### Connect A to B

Warrants are the second step in a three-part argument. They can range from a single sentence to multiple paragraphs depending on what you need to prove.

They do need to support the claim. Sometimes reporters get bogged down in the data and don't realize they aren't proving their bigger idea true.

### Models

*He doesn't have superpowers.*

*She has a track record to prove she does what she means.*

*It bans students from wearing shirts with political messages.*

# Impact: Why Does It Matter?

## WRITING STRONG ARGUMENTS

### Spell It Out For Them

The impact is the reason the argument should matter to your reader. Without it, who cares? You may assume readers may follow the logic from the first two parts of the argument, but they may not.

If you write out exactly why they are supposed to care, it may help connect the dots for readers who don't fully see it.

### Models

*Superheros are extraordinary people who go above and beyond to help. Most of them rely on supernatural powers and abilities while Batman does not to achieve the same effect.*

*Candidates should be judged not just by what they say, but also by what they do. If she not only says it, but does it, there is no other candidate to support.*

*Schools are meant to encourage hard conversations, not prevent them. This policy, therefore, undermines that fundamental goal.*



## Writing Strong Arguments Exit Ticket

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

### Write It!

In the space below, write (and label each part) a complete argument on any side of the topic to the left. Your position & argument is up to you, but it must have a claim, warrant and impact.

### Topic

Should the United States focus more on human rights or the economy?

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### Topic

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### Rationale

There are many ways to structure an opinion piece and none of those is a 100% “correct” way to get thoughts published. However, this structure is a good starting point. Once reporters have the basic idea, they can branch off this structure, add to, rearrange, etc. But they have to walk before they can run.

**CLASS GOAL:** We will learn a basic structure of opinion writing.

**INDIVIDUAL GOAL:** I will create a draft structure using the topic I researched and prepared previously.

### Goals for Understanding

Students will understand & demonstrate

- Start with a background sentence or paragraph explaining enough of the situation to give readers context
- Have a clear and direct stance after the background
- And start the body of the article after the stance to educate and persuade the reader using complete arguments

### Overview & Timeline

This lesson is designed to be completed in one, 45-minute class period with students split into groups of four. Students can be given additional days to research before this lesson begins however.

Lesson includes

- Warm up activity/preactivity assessment
- Direct instruction
- Cooperative learning activity
- Closing/post-activity assessment

### Materials Needed

- “Background, Stance & Body Instructional Cards” for each group
- “Background, Stance & Body Puzzle” cut & mixed up for each group (suggested key in documents)
- “Background, Stance & Body Worksheet” for each student.

### Day 1

**WARM UP ACTIVITY:** Show Slides 2 & 3 of the slideshow and have students individually complete the activity with a 2-minute time limit. Then, direct students to go around their group explaining and justifying each of their results using the round-robin method for 20 seconds per student. Use a timer application or website to show the students how much time is left. Audibly signal when it is time to switch group members and ensure everyone is talking. Slide 4 has the suggested version the teacher can use to preview the lesson.

**INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Have each group member pull one of the four “Background, Stance & Body Instructional Cards” and read to themselves for 1-2 minutes. Then, have each student spend 30 seconds explaining to the group members the different concepts.

Have groups take the “Background, Stance & Body Puzzle” pieces from wherever the teacher prefers. Tell students that their group’s goal is to put together five paragraphs of an opinion article and that it will be missing the remaining two parts they have not learned yet.

They should figure out that there are several backgrounds, stances and arguments. Some of the arguments are only partially complete. Stances are wishy-washy. Backgrounds miss vital information or have too many details. Give them none of that information beforehand. Once the group believes it is finished, members should raise their hands. Tell them if they are right or wrong, then give them a one-word hint as broadly as possible like “structure” or “argument”. They should be forced to coach one another and refer to their notes. When a group gets it right, celebrate, but then have the group members split up to the other groups to COACH them, but not give the right answer away. They are also not allowed to touch any pieces, point, or otherwise give away the answer. Every group in the room must be finished to move on. The goal is for the class to teach each other how to think about the order, quality of argument, etc. without being told the answer.

Slide 5 has a recap of concepts.

Then, have students work on the “Background, Stance & Body Worksheet” independently to plan out their opinion piece. They should have the remaining time in class to do so.

**EXIT TICKET/CLOSING ACTIVITY:** Turn in their worksheet.

**NOTE & CRITIQUE OPTIONS:** Students may not finish the worksheet. Teachers may assign a whole additional day to complete the worksheet if the research time is required. It would also be wise to set aside time for groups to critique one another’s work. To do so, students could do a write round robin format where they pass their paper to the right, critique the background and pass the paper until all background comments are critiqued. Then, continue the same pattern for the stance and three arguments. Students could then question their group members on comments and then revise.

### References

- Etwell, J., Balmeo, M., Austin, E., & Hamm R. (2021). *Journalism: Publishing Across Media*. The Goodheart-Willcox Company.
- Fink, C. C. (2004). *Writing Opinion for Impact*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Harrower, T. (2013). *Inside Reporting: A Practical Guide to the Craft of Journalism*. McGraw-Hill.
- Hawthorne, B. (2019). *The Radical Write*. Jostens.
- Kanigel, R. (2012). *The Student Newspaper Survival Guide*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Stovall, J. (2009). *Writing for the Mass Media*. Pearson.
- Strunk, W., & White, E. (2000). *The Elements of Style*. Allyn & Bacon.

## Background: What's the Situation?

BACKGROUND, STANCE & BODY

### Back to the Lede

The background is a short paragraph somewhere toward the top — usually at the beginning — of the article that clues readers in on why the opinion article is important now. Beginning columnists should put this first.

It is essentially written as the lede to a hard news story.

### Example

For an opinion piece on cellphone bans

*No students can have a cellphone on campus starting next week after Principal Polly Pocket created the new policy to address a decline in grades across the school.*

### Draft It!

Think about the topic you are writing about. Craft a background sentence that explains why you are writing about this now.

## Background: Just Enough to Know

BACKGROUND, STANCE & BODY

### Keep It Simple

The background sentence or paragraph does not need to be a complete rehashing of the news event. That's what the news story about it is for.

For an opinion article, you need to give enough information to provide context to your arguments without being redundant.

### Example

For an opinion piece on cellphone bans

*No students can have a cellphone on campus starting next week after Principal Polly Pocket created the new policy to fix declining grades.*

Readers know just enough to get the idea.

### Draft It!

Think about the topic you are writing about. What do readers already know? What do you need to explain in your background? Is yours a complex topic needing in-depth explanation or a simple one?

## Stance: Be Clear & Direct

BACKGROUND, STANCE & BODY

### How Do You Feel?

The stance is a sentence or paragraph bluntly laying out your opinion on the topic. This is not a time to be wishy washy (a half-hearted attempt to hold a position, usually to "not sound mean").

People can clearly see how you feel and know what to expect when they continue on reading the piece.

### Example

For an opinion piece on cellphone bans

*The principal should retract the campus cellphone ban.*

Everyone gets it. There is no ambiguity about how you feel. Avoid "some people say this, some people say that" stances.

### Draft It!

Think about the topic you are writing about. Craft a clear and direct stance.

## Body of Opinion Piece

BACKGROUND, STANCE & BODY

### Educate Them

The main body comes after the background and stance. This is where your various, complete arguments live and make up the bulk of the article. Order your arguments from the least to most convincing so readers become more persuaded as they read instead of less.

After the body is refutation and a call to action, which you will see in future lessons more in depth.

### First Part of Structure

For an opinion piece on cellphone bans

*Background explaining the cellphone ban.*

*Stance: Retract the policy*

*Argument 1: No way to enforce*

*Argument 2: Used in class*

*Argument 3: Contacting parents*

### Draft It!

Think about the topic you are writing about.

Create a draft structure of your editorial through the end of the body paragraph using the one to the left as a model.

# Background, Stance & Body Worksheet

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

## Instructions

Use the worksheet below to help guide you to what you need for each section of the opinion article you are writing.

## Background

### *What Happened/Is Happening?*

What event took place that makes this worth talking about now?

### *Who is Involved?*

Who are all the people involved in the topic?

### *Why Did/Will It Occur?*

What is the reason people say this is happening or did happen?

### *Where, When & How*

Is there a location? When did it happen? Does the how matter?

## Stance

### *How Do You Feel?*

What is your position on the topic, stated as simple as possible?

### *What's Your Big Reason Why?*

Describe a common theme to your arguments after writing them.

## Simplified Argument 1

### *Claim*

What is one reason you believe in your stance?

## Simplified Argument 2

### *Claim*

What is one reason you believe in your stance?

## Simplified Argument 3

### *Claim*

What is one reason you believe in your stance?

### *Warrant*

How do you know that's true?

### *Warrant*

How do you know that's true?

### *Warrant*

How do you know that's true?

### *Impact*

If true, why does the claim support your stance?

### *Impact*

If true, why does the claim support your stance?

### *Impact*

If true, why does the claim support your stance?

# Background, Stance & Body Puzzle

## OPINION WRITING UNIT

### Key — Entire Left Side

A group of parents will present the school board with a petition Monday that would bring back the Miss Cityville High pageant after the 51-year-old event was canceled last week. Superintendent Paula Harrison and Mayor Riki O'Hara made the announcement at a press conference, saying that the pageant was objectifying female students.

The board should reject the idea of bringing it back to show girls that they are more than just flesh.

The public nature of a pageant allows adults to watch young girls compete, opening the door for inappropriate behavior. When the pageant takes place, any member of the community could walk in, video or photograph the girls on the stage and use the material for sexually inappropriate ways. This means not only would the school be the reason for providing the opportunity for those people, but also forever ruining the lives of the girls whose pictures were distributed online or used for gross behavior.

Pageants also have a long history of putting undue pressure on girls, which can cause major trauma physically and mentally. Participants often engage in bulimia or anorexia just to have a shot at winning, which also causes mental health issues including body dysmorphia. This type of trauma is not temporary; physical and mental health issues last longer than one pageant and even an entire lifetime.

At its core, pageants are about one thing: judging girls on their appearance, which is gross on its face. The competition only includes formal gown and bathing suit portions – the talent portion having been eliminated years ago. Without any portion that relies on a girl's personality or intellect, it teaches girls that the only aspect of themselves they should care about is their appearance.

Those in favor of keeping the pageant feel strongly the event is part of a long held and deeply valued tradition that even provides a scholarship to its winner. However, the school could always invest more time in having students create new traditions and other ways to provide scholarship opportunities.

The school board should hear the parent group's petition out, but ultimately leave the pageant rightfully canceled.

A group of parents will present the school board with a petition Monday. Superintendent Paula Harrison and Mayor Riki O'Hara made the announcement at a press conference, saying that the pageant was objectifying female students.

The board should reject the idea of bringing it back.

The public nature of a pageant allows adults to watch young girls compete, opening the door for inappropriate behavior. This means not only would the school be the reason for providing the opportunity for those people, but also forever ruining the lives of the girls whose pictures were distributed online or used for gross behavior.

Pageants also have a long history of putting undue pressure on girls, which can cause major trauma physically and mentally. This type of trauma is not temporary; physical and mental health issues last far longer than just one pageant and even an entire lifetime.

At its core, pageants are about one thing: judging girls on their appearance, which is gross on its face. Without any portion that relies on a girl's personality or intellect, it teaches girls that the only aspect of themselves they should care about is their appearance.

Those in favor of keeping the pageant feel strongly the event is part of a long held and deeply valued tradition that even provides a scholarship to its winner. However, they're wrong because the pageant is sexist.

The school board should hear the parent group's petition out and we'll see what happens.

When the pageant takes place, any member of the community could walk in, video or photograph the girls on the stage and use the material for sexually inappropriate ways. This means not only would the school be the reason for providing the opportunity for those people, but also forever ruining the lives of the girls whose pictures were distributed online or used for gross behavior.

Participants often engage in bulimia or anorexia just to have a shot at winning, which also causes mental health issues including body dysmorphia. This type of trauma is not temporary; physical and mental health issues last far longer than just one pageant and even an entire lifetime.

At its core, pageants are about one thing: judging girls on their appearance, which is gross on its face. The competition only includes formal gown and bathing suit – the talent portion having been eliminated years ago.



### Rationale

If opinion articles are about persuading people who don't already agree with the writer, there must be clash. The opinion article author must, in some way, clash with those that disagree. This is where the debate lives and the driver of conversation.

**CLASS GOAL:** We will learn how and why to refute people who have the opposite stance.

**INDIVIDUAL GOAL:** I will write a paragraph refuting people who disagree with my topic stance.

### Goals for Understanding

Students will understand & demonstrate

- Refutation helps break down reasons for people to disagree with you, making them easier to persuade
- Understand the other side's reasonings for believing their position
- Refute the big ideas, especially those relevant to the writer's position
- And give the other side a legitimate explanation so the opposition feels like the writer fully understands their reasons, which makes them more likely to read and become persuaded

### Overview & Timeline

This lesson is designed to be completed in one, 45-minute class period with students split into groups of four. Students can be given additional time to research before this lesson begins however.

Lesson includes

- Warm up activity/preactivity assessment
- Direct instruction
- Cooperative learning activity
- Closing/post-activity assessment

### Materials Needed

- "Refuting the Opposition Instructional Sheets" cut for each group
- "Refuting the Opposition Worksheet" for each student.

### Day 1

**WARM UP ACTIVITY:** Show Slides 2 & 3 of the slideshow and have students individually complete the activity with a 2-minute time limit. Then, direct students to go around their group explaining and justifying each of their results using the round-robin method for 20 seconds per student. Use a timer application or website to show the students how much time is left. Audibly signal when it is time to switch group members and ensure everyone is talking. Slide 4 has the suggested answer the teacher can use to preview the lesson.

**INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Have each group member pull one of the four "Refuting the Opposition Instructional Cards" and read to themselves for 1-2 minutes. Then, have each student spend 30 seconds explaining to the group members the different concepts.

**NO, YOU'RE WRONG:** Have students mix around the room and pair up randomly. They will now enter a debate competition called "No, You're Wrong!" One by one, each pair will walk to the front of the room. The youngest partner will read the prompt on Slide 5 and give one reason they agree or disagree with the statement. Regardless of the other student's actual position, they have 5 seconds to begin explaining why they believe the original student is wrong. Then, the first student will explain why the other student's rebuttal was incorrect. This will continue until one of them cannot come up with an answer and begin talking in 5 seconds, gives up, or repeats an argument they already said. That person is then eliminated and stands behind/with their opponent and now becomes their cheerleader for the next match. Slides 6-14 have various debate topics.

This process continues with each pair coming up, debating until one gives up until all original pairs have gone. Then, winners face off. When one winner loses, they and their cheerleader will join the new winner. (The size of each person's cheer squad should double with each win.) This continues until you have a class winner and the class all celebrates them.

Slide 15 has a recap of concepts.

**EXIT TICKET/CLOSING ACTIVITY:** Have students complete the "Refuting the Opposition Worksheet" and turn it in.

### References

- Etwell, J., Balmeo, M., Austin, E., & Hamm R. (2021). *Journalism: Publishing Across Media*. The Goodheart-Willcox Company.
- Fink, C. C. (2004). *Writing Opinion for Impact*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Harrower, T. (2013). *Inside Reporting: A Practical Guide to the Craft of Journalism*. McGraw-Hill.
- Hawthorne, B. (2019). *The Radical Write*. Jostens.
- Kanigel, R. (2012). *The Student Newspaper Survival Guide*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Stovall, J. (2009). *Writing for the Mass Media*. Pearson.
- Strunk, W., & White, E. (2000). *The Elements of Style*. Allyn & Bacon.

## Try to Change Minds

### REFUTING THE OPPOSITION

#### Root Out the Cause

In order to convince someone to change their mind, you must first know why they feel that way. What is the reason they support one side over the other?

By understanding the opposite side in a genuine way, you are better prepared to know how to convince them. Otherwise, what makes sense to you may not to them.

#### There's a Reason

The point of writing opinion pieces is to make change in some way — changes in what people buy, who they vote for, what policies and practices exist, how people are treated, etc. None of that can happen by writing opinion if your opposition's beliefs don't originate with what you are arguing about.

#### Draft It!

Think about the topic you are writing about. What do people who disagree with you say? Why do they feel that way? How do you convince them otherwise?

## What Are the Main Talking Points?

### REFUTING THE OPPOSITION

#### The Big Idea

There is a bad habit among beginning editorial writers to refute the opposition by picking the opposition's weakest argument and attacking that.

However, that isn't convincing. To do that, you must really tackle head on the biggest ideas and do it well.

Don't be afraid of a challenge.

#### Example

When advocating for more funding of Alzheimer's research, a rookie reporter might write "opponents of increased funding say the world would be better off if we reduced the surplus population." That's not why more funding doesn't exist. Instead, focus on real reasons like avoiding government debt and that there is already plenty of research happening.

#### Draft It!

Think about the topic you are writing about. What do people who disagree with you argue? What's the biggest reason they are against your stance?

## Writing the Refutation

### REFUTING THE OPPOSITION

#### Order

Where the refutation falls in the article depends on the body. At first, put it right after the body paragraphs and before your call to action. This lets you try to prove your reasoning first, then show how the other side is wrong.

The call to action is last, which you will see in the next lesson.

#### Reason, Then Refute

When writing the paragraph, start by fairly explaining the other side's perspective, then explaining why it is wrong to you.

*Principal Polly Pocket said the cellphone ban will increase grades because there are less distractions. However, studies show students develop anxiety and become fixated on not having their phone. This policy does the opposite of what she is trying to do.*

#### Draft It!

Write a sentence explaining the other side and one reason you disagree with them.

## Give Them a Fair Explanation

### REFUTING THE OPPOSITION

#### They Should Be Heard

In order to convince someone to change their mind, they have to know you understand their position. Many people feel unconvinced in arguments because they don't feel the other person understands what they are trying to say.

Fairly explaining their position and reasons goes a long way in changing minds.

#### If Not...

If you unfairly explain why people feel a certain way, miss the actual point, or use a small, silly reason someone might support their side, the opposition might feel like you are trying to belittle them or cherry pick arguments to make yourself look better.

They will not be convinced.

#### Draft It!

Write a sentence fairly explaining the other side's position.

# *Refuting the Opposition Worksheet*

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

## *Instructions*

Use the worksheet below to help guide you to what you need for each section of the opinion article you are writing.

### **Knowing the Opposition**

*What are the three biggest arguments of the opposition against your stance?*

Circle the one you feel is the most fair representation of the opposition side.

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### **Refutation 1**

*What is one way you can refute the argument you circled?*

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### **Refutation 2**

*What is another way you can refute the argument you circled?*

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### **Refutation 3**

*What is another way you can refute the argument you circled?*

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### **Explain & Refute**

*Combine a fair explanation of their position & your refutation into a paragraph.*

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### Rationale

People are much more likely to enact change if opinion writers ask them to. Some readers will be convinced, but don't know what to do with their newfound position. That's what the call to action solves at the end of the article.

**CLASS GOAL:** We will understand types of calls to action and why they matter.

**INDIVIDUAL GOAL:** I will write the three different types of calls to action while being specific and intentional.

### Goals for Understanding

Students will understand & demonstrate

- Solution-based calls to action where the writer tries to fix the problem
- Asking readers to take some action
- Asking authority figures to take some action on the issue
- And that calls to action must be specific and intentional to address the problem at hand.

### Overview & Timeline

This lesson is designed to be completed in two, 45-minute class periods with students split into groups of four, but may be completed in one depending on class length.

Lesson includes

- Warm up activity/preactivity assessment
- Direct instruction
- Cooperative learning activity
- Closing/post-activity assessment

### Materials Needed

- "Call to Action Instructional Cards" cut for each group
- "Call to Action Problem Solving Worksheet" for each group
- "Call to Action Exit Ticket" cut for each student

### Day 1

**WARM UP ACTIVITY:** Show Slides 2 & 3 of the slideshow and have students individually complete the activity with a 2-minute time limit. Then, direct students to go around their group explaining and justifying each of their results using the round-robin method for 20 seconds per student. Use a timer application or website to show the students how much time is left. Audibly signal when it is time to switch group members and ensure everyone is talking. Slide 4 has the suggested answer the teacher can use to preview the lesson.

**INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITY:** Have each group member pull one of the four "Call to Action Instructional Cards" and read to themselves for 1-2 minutes. Then, have each student spend 30 seconds explaining their concept to the group members.

Then, hand each group a copy of the "Call to Action Problem Solving Worksheet". Have the groups create a scenario that might have an opinion piece written about. The worksheet has space on the top half for the group to create a hypothetical situation and what the justification is.

Once the groups have created their scenarios, they should trade with another group. Now, the group will shift from creating a scenario to developing a call to action that provides a solution to the situation at hand. Each member of the group should come up with their own call to action sentence regarding the situation. Then, the group will confer in two pairs and discuss each other's call to action. They will either choose one, or create a compromise of the two. Then, the group will compare the final two solutions and write one in the spot for the call to action. Then they will pass to the next group.

The process will repeat with the group reading the scenario another group created and coming up with a solution. However, they cannot repeat a call to action another group already made. This way, the groups are forced to create new types of calls to action. Do this until all the call to action spots are filled up and return the papers to their original groups.

Slide 5 has a recap of concepts.

Groups should discuss the calls to action and what were the best ones. Have each group explain their favorite and why.

**EXIT TICKET/CLOSING ACTIVITY:** Have all students complete the "Call to Action Exit Ticket" and turn into the teacher. If time allows, students can partner up and critique each other's calls to action before turning them in.

### Future & Project Recommendation

After this, give students time in class to put all the pieces of their opinion piece together, clean up, revise and edit.

Then, it would be good to have them write another from scratch using the structure but without doing it piecemeal.

### References

- Etwell, J., Balmeo, M., Austin, E., & Hamm R. (2021). *Journalism: Publishing Across Media*. The Goodheart-Willcox Company.
- Fink, C. C. (2004). *Writing Opinion for Impact*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Harrower, T. (2013). *Inside Reporting: A Practical Guide to the Craft of Journalism*. McGraw-Hill.
- Hawthorne, B. (2019). *The Radical Write*. Jostens.
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- Stovall, J. (2009). *Writing for the Mass Media*. Pearson.
- Strunk, W., & White, E. (2000). *The Elements of Style*. Allyn & Bacon.

## *Present a Solution*

CALLING TO ACTION

### *Be a Problem Solver*

Calls to action can be attempts to present a way to solve the existing problem through an existing solution, or one the writer makes themselves.

Either of these can work. It shows readers you are not just complaining to complain, but actually working toward a better future.

Calls to action go at the end, telling someone to do something about the issue.

### *Model*

*Instead of banning cellphones, teachers should do a better job of classroom management and providing engaging lessons to prevent students from getting bored and turning to their phone.*

### *Write It!*

Think about your topic. What is your ideal solution? How would you want to solve it? What solutions are already out there?

Write a sentence with a solution-based call to action.

## *Talk to Readers*

CALLING TO ACTION

### *Readers, Assemble!*

There are many cases where your readers have the power to fix problems: They can change behaviors, vote, boycott, protest, write letters, buy or not buy, strike, praise, criticize, and anything else where mass amounts of people get attention. Make sure it is something they can actually achieve within the law.

Calls to action go at the end, telling someone to do something about the issue.

### *Model*

*Students and parents should contact the school board through email, phone calls or show up to the next meeting so it can override the principal's ban on cellphones.*

### *Write It!*

Think about your topic. What could your readers do to solve the problem?

Write a reader-action-based call to action.

## *Talk to the Authority*

CALLING TO ACTION

### *Speak to the Manager*

Opinion pieces often give voice to the voiceless. But what does that really mean? It means the publication is serving as the middle man between reader and those in power. People with power and authority to make the change can be the target of calls to action. Tell them directly to solve the problem.

Calls to action go at the end, telling someone to do something about the issue.

### *Model*

*Principal Polly Pocket should hold a focus group of students to discuss possible solutions to her concerns without banning cellphones and causing more problems for the school.*

### *Write It!*

Think about your topic. What people in charge could solve your topic's problem?

Write an authority-based call to action.

## *Be Specific & Intentional*

CALLING TO ACTION

### *I Should Do What?*

Calls to action should be specific about what you want the person to do and intentional about it addressing your concerns.

Vague or broad calls to action are confusing for readers. Lazy calls to action don't actually do anything to help.

Calls to action go at the end, telling someone to do something about the issue.

### *Good Model*

*Students, faculty and staff should contact Superintendent Lee Durr and ask he stop the cellphone ban before it takes effect.*

### *Bad Model*

*Students, faculty and staff should do something about the policy before it's too late.*

### *Write It!*

Think about your topic. What action would actually solve the problem? What would you need to tell people to solve that problem?

Write a specific and intentional call to action.



# *Call to Action: Problem Solving*

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Opinion Topic Scenario**

### *Instructions for Group Creating the Scenario*

Use the top section to create a scenario that another group will have to write calls to action to. They can be as realistic or fictional as you like. Include the following: What is the big change being debated? Who is pushing for the change? Is there a vote, meeting or other event coming up related to this issue? Write the scenario as you would a background paragraph at the top of the opinion article. The other groups will try to create solutions to solve the problem.

Example: "Student Council is speaking to the school board next week asking members to ban homework. They say students don't have enough time and that they don't like homework anyway."

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### *Instructions for Receiving Groups*

Write a call to action that solves the problem above and provide a warrant and impact below that, or find an alternate solution to the one proposed in the scenario (if one exists). In the example above, you might ask the school board to deny/approve the group's request, create a compromise like only allowing one homework assignment per week, or something completely different like there should never be any assignments at all — at school or at home.

## **Call to Action 1**

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## **Call to Action 2**

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## **Call to Action 3**

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## **Call to Action 4**

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## Call to Action Exit Ticket

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

### Write It!

In the space below, write a call to action. Try to think outside of the box and a way to enhance, reform or come to consensus on the issue. It is often more persuasive when your arguments and/or call to action are fresh.

### Think!

In your opinion article, what is the main problem you are trying to solve through your position? What should be done about it? Who/what type of people are the best one to do so?

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## Call to Action Exit Ticket

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

### Write It!

In the space below, write a call to action. Try to think outside of the box and a way to enhance, reform or come to consensus on the issue. It is often more persuasive when your arguments and/or call to action are fresh.

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## Call to Action Exit Ticket

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In your opinion article, what is the main problem you are trying to solve through your position? What should be done about it? Who/what type of people are the best one to do so?

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