

Placing an Op-Ed, Letter to the Editor, or Editorial

Send a message to your community – submit an op-ed or letter to your local newspaper! Papers typically ask that op-eds and letters be written by locals, so National Arts & Humanities Month (NAHM) is a great opportunity to highlight the arts and humanities and their broader impact on your community in a 500–600-word opinion piece that appears opposite the editorial page of your local newspaper. For many community papers, ‘letters to the editor’ serve this role.

The Op-Ed Page and Letters to the Editor

- Define the goal of the piece and determine what you are trying to accomplish. Are you defining an issue, educating the public and policymakers, raising awareness, adding information, or calling for action? Use NAHM as a jumping-off point for your op-ed, not as the subject. Put it in the context of your local community’s issues—like budget concerns or local education issues. State your case quickly.
 - Review the research to bolster your local community’s case on that particular subject.
 - Speak about one issue. You should concentrate on a single issue, and it should be the strongest arts issue in your community.
 - Each community, no matter what size or where, has its own artists and treasured cultural organizations. Each community has its own important patrons and supportive elected officials, its own local heroes for the arts and humanities. NAHM can be a time to say thanks, to highlight the impact these artists made and the arts challenges ahead.
- Select the best author. Op-ed pieces are often written by an expert expanding on a recent issue or an item of continuing interest to the newspaper. These experts add new information, fresh perspective, or a point of view, rather than restating established facts. Sometimes an op-ed is most effective when it is ghost-written for an expert. This can be an elected official, head of a local arts organization, official of your local PTA, superintendent of schools, the head of the board of education, an arts teacher, the head of your student government, or a state or federal legislator—particularly if that person is a leader in the arts.
- Always consider timing and how the op-ed can be linked to a particular event to maximize its impact. Sharing how your community is supporting artists who were hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, or how your community is rebounding, can be impactful. Remember: use NAHM as a strategic way to educate public officials about what happens year-round.
- Letters to the editor also allow you to raise public awareness about an issue and educate policymakers, while positioning your organization as an information resource to the media. The threshold for publication of a letter is somewhat lower, but again, writers usually are commenting on a recent news topic. Connecting to a NAHM photo or article is important. Who the signer is also matters with letters to the editor (see the above bullet point about selecting the best author).
- October is a good general time to target the publication, but start to work on this in late August or early September. Newspapers can take up to two weeks to publish an op-ed,

and many of them can be open to your timing suggestions, so don't hesitate to give them a suggestion of a few days or a week when you'd like your piece to run. Stay in touch with the editor and offer to edit the piece. Also, everyone likes to be thanked.

Tips for Authors

- Make certain that you understand the publication's guidelines regarding op-ed pieces. Those guidelines are usually found on the publication's website – search for “submission guidelines” or “how to submit.”
- Be clear and concise. Limit the article to 600 words. Remember the reader – connect the issue to your own community.
- Use simple, short sentences, and avoid jargon. Consider leading with a compelling story, and close with a short, powerful paragraph that drives your point home and includes a call to action. Some humor and/or a personal story tied to the issue can improve the op-ed's chance of being selected.
- If you'd like, include a headline as a suggestion, but note that most opinion editors write their own headline for the piece. Write a short biographical statement about the signer (usually one brief sentence), include their contact phone and email (because the publication will check on that), and always disclose pertinent relationships that the person may have with the organization.
- Most publications ask that op-eds be sent via email; some have an online application form. In the case of the email, paste the op-ed text into the email. Do not include attachments, as they usually get stuck in the spam filters and never get seen.
- Publications usually insist that op-eds are exclusive to them, so do not send the piece to multiple publications at once hoping that one sticks. Try for your favorite one first. Then if you don't hear back in a week (more of this in the next point), you can move on to your second choice. This is why it's a good idea to start your op-ed work in August.
- Following up soon after submission is often not a great idea. Editors are extremely busy, and your follow-up might be viewed as pestering rather than reminding. If you submitted the text of your op-ed without any attachment, and double-checked that the email address was correct, then you can be assured that your piece was received and is being considered. If you don't hear back within a week, then you can assume the publication has passed on your piece, and you can now move on to the second-best publication.

If Your Local Paper Declines Your Op-Ed: Other Uses

- Letters to the editor. Shorten the piece to about 150 words and resubmit it as a letter to the editor. Again, check on the paper's guidelines for submitting a letter.
- Press release. If some of the points in the op-ed piece qualify as news, that is, facts [statistics, occurrences, or study findings] rather than the opinion of the writer, convert it to a press release. Send it to specific reporters, depending on the news subject—arts

and education reporters, radio or broadcast TV, public affairs directors, talk-show hosts, or program directors.

- Position statements. Adapt the piece into a position paper and distribute it to key decisionmakers and other audiences you want to influence. Use it to introduce your organization to a new group.
- Print it in your newsletter. Don't overlook your own publications as a place for an op-ed piece by your executive director/senior leadership.

Contacting the Editorial Board

The editorial board is a group of people at a publication who, in consultation with the publisher, dictate the tone and direction the publication's editorial positions will take. Editorial boards meet on a regular basis to discuss the latest news and opinion trends and discuss what the newspaper should say on a range of issues. They will then decide who will write what editorials and for what day. When such an editorial appears in a newspaper, it is considered the institutional opinion of that newspaper.

Editorial boards are available and willing to meet with responsible people who have something to say that is relevant to the community. If you would like to meet with an editorial board or an editorial writer, your message and the editorial support you request should be consistent with those purposes.

- To approach an editorial board, write an email requesting a meeting. It should briefly describe the issue you are concerned about and why the editorial board should know about the issue, or your point of view on it. Follow up on your email with a phone call to see if the board, or an individual, is interested in a meeting with you. It's important to do this PRIOR to October. By itself, October as NAHM will not guarantee a story—even if your local elected official signs a proclamation.
- Prior to the meeting, collect and review data and other material that will be concise, understandable, and useful background information for the editorial board—but don't overdo it. Four to five different pieces of information are usually enough. Any more than that and they may not read any of it. If possible, tie your presentation to something newsworthy—ideally a story that has been recently covered by the newspaper or one that the newspaper knows is approaching. Consider bringing with you other prominent people from the community who support your point of view. Be prepared to cite as many local angles as possible.
- Follow up the meeting not only with whatever additional information you promised to provide, but also with a thank-you note to the editorial board members you talked with.
- If they will not write an editorial, pursue the op-ed piece. Make certain that you understand their guidelines regarding editorials, op-ed pieces, and even letters to the editor.

For more information, e-mail press@artsusa.org or call 202.371.2830.