

Throughout the course of one's career in the prestigious Opinion section of The Michigan Daily, a writer may hope to isolate what specifically their prose could improve upon. Historically, any information regarding or relating to the goals and requirements for a "good" opinion piece have been either disseminated during one-off trainings or informally in the form of messages or reminders to our columnists.

We hope this document not only organizes and makes digestible a set of guidelines to follow and refer back to for columnists, but also acts as a place where all Opinion staffers can go to find quick answers to questions they might have about the nature and quality of the content that we publish in the section. To do this, we have split up this document into four sections:

The **Argument section** details all relevant information to answer the question "**What makes a strong argument?**" Your primary goal as an Opinion writer is to *convince* the reader, therefore we have specific requirements on the scope and content of arguments made in the section.

The **Organization section** details all relevant information to answer the question "**How should I structure my argument?**" A *clear and concise line of reasoning* is key in making a proper argument. Your claims should be introduced, evidenced and concluded in a proper manner.

The **Writing section** details all relevant information to answer the question "**How should I write my Opinion pieces?**" The [Daily's Style Guide](#) is an important and helpful resource, and one that should be consulted first on grammar and syntax questions; but, there are a few key points pertinent to writing Opinion pieces that require specific attention. These points include citations, interviews, voice and verbiage.

The **Process section** details all relevant information to answer the question "**What does the editing process look like for Opinion and what is required of me during that process?**" This section goes through the entirety of the content creation process in the Opinion section, from pitching to publication, as well as the responsibilities of all associated.

As a final note, everything in this document serves to uphold our mission statement:

To uplift campus voices and stimulate productive and empathetic dialogue regarding issues that matter to the campus and Ann Arbor community while consistently improving the quality of the rhetoric and arguments that come from our section

I. Argument

“People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered than by those which have come into the mind of others.”

- Blaise Pascal

At the center of opinion journalism lies the argument. Everyday, people form, deform, break, change, shift and alter their opinions on a variety of topics. The goal of argument, as it stands in The Michigan Daily, should be to influence this process on a local level. Doing this isn't easy. Thankfully, there's been no shortage of discourse and research on what makes an effective argument. Here are a few things to keep in mind.

Know your audience

One of the most important things to keep track of when making any argument is who you are making that argument to. A good argument is one that readers will resonate with or relate to in some way, shape or form. Proximity to events, prominent biases and recent conversation all serve as great “ins” to the minds and hearts of our community. In short, **readers of the Michigan Daily should care**. Many writers may feel familiar with the environment and atmosphere of the University and the greater Ann Arbor community, but referral back to statistics, reports about the demographics of our institution, and interviewing community members can prove helpful, especially when writing about campus-centered topics.

Scope

Locality and Applicability

Every argument in the Opinion section of the Michigan Daily must make a contained argument that relates in some way to our campus community, in order to push the envelope of campus conversation. **This can be reached either by opining on a relevant campus or community issue, or bringing a broader issue “home.”** To accomplish the latter, an effort must be made to bring the pertinence of the issue front and center to our readers: How will it affect them? How can they get involved? Why should they care?

Specificity

Michigan Daily Opinion pieces should have a specific claim that has clear opponents and proponents. A piece “exploring” or “explaining” a broad topic does not serve to push campus conversation in any direction. Additionally, the scope of the argument should not be in any way “too large” to tackle in a standard length column.

In your piece, it's important to be aware of all conclusions and arguments that you indirectly cite, bring in or otherwise endorse. Don't imply something you are unwilling to, or unable to, defend. This includes dog whistling and opting for rhetorical questions, rather than clearly stating your claims.

Know Yourself

Every writer should feel some sort of authority on the broader topic that encompasses their argument. This authority can come from personal experience or identity, extensive research or any other personal factor that establishes credibility to the audience. This authority should be communicated to the audience in order to strengthen the argument.

A writer should also know themselves and their background before making an argument. Depending on the identity, background, or personal experiences of the writer an argument will read differently — a student asking to abolish grades comes off much differently than a teacher doing the exact same thing. Given this, writers should modify their voice, tone, evidence or general argument so as to compensate for any preconceived notions audiences might have about the credibility of the writer. For example, if a writer is writing an opinion piece that dissents from the majority opinion, they should make sure their tone doesn't come off too harshly or their opinion may be disregarded by the audience.

Novelty

Opinion pieces at the Michigan Daily should be new, fresh takes on a variety of topics. New opinions, new topics and new perspectives on existing topics are great ways to ensure our content is unique, and therefore more effective in producing productive dialogue. Writers should do extensive research on their topics and gauge the atmosphere of current discourse on said topic, in order to directly avoid repeating what's already been said in other publications or mediums. Novelty often goes hand in hand with choosing local, applicable topics of which the writer has authority on.

Counterargument

Existence of Disagreement

People must be able to disagree with you! Their existence usually marks a good choice of topic and argument. If others, or you, can't think of a proper counterargument to your claim, the claim is either not strong enough or not specific enough. Existence of disagreement also means that people should be able to disagree with reason. Arguments about personal preferences — like which coffee shops are best in Ann Arbor — are not strong arguments because they can't be refuted in a reasonable way; they are based on personal taste.

Acknowledgement

Acknowledging potential counterarguments gives credibility to your own argument. It is also good practice. Quality arguments acknowledge their counterarguments and either refute them or integrate them into the argument itself. Acknowledging counter arguments is also an opportunity to appeal to your opponents and convince them of your position. However, counter arguments should be incorporated in order to make the main argument stronger, not because it “has to be in there.” Given this, it's up to the discretion of the writer to decide to what extent they choose to engage with the counterargument, but it must be logically integrated into the rest of the article. For example, if writing about the potential dangers of AI in the creative space, it doesn't make sense to include a counter argument detailing the good that AI can do outside of the creative space. It would, however, make sense to talk about whether the criticisms brought up about AI are as strongly founded as they seem.

II. Organization

“Tidying orders and relaxes the mind.”

- Marie Kondo

Organization can make or break any piece of writing, whether that be a 200-page feature film, or an 800-word opinion column. A strong method of organization leads to a clear line of reasoning, which itself leads to the perception of a stronger argument. Of course, there are multiple ways to communicate your thoughts effectively, but starting off with a good command of the norms of your medium will then allow you to eventually break them. Here is a general outline, in order, of how a strong opinion piece might look. Of course, it is a writer's prerogative to break free from such a stringent view of opinion journalism as provided below. But, it's good to first know the rules, before you break them.

1. Lede/Hook

The beginning of a piece is arguably the most important part. Most readers decide whether they'd like to read your column or piece based on the quality and character of the first few lines that they see. Therefore, it is evermore important that you use this space effectively and efficiently. The hook should provide some sense of urgency or importance to the columnist. This can be done through plugging a recent news story which the audience might be familiar with, starting with a dramatic personal anecdote that the audience might be able to relate to or generally starting with some piece of shocking or intriguing information. A great way to brainstorm a hook is to ask yourself: *Why am I writing about this topic?* (Depending on what you are writing about, one to two paragraphs of context might be needed to fully inform the reader.)

2. Thesis

After you've gotten the audience's attention with your hook, it is time to lay your claim. Your thesis should be one to two sentences detailing your stance on the topic which you've introduced. A clear thesis statement allows your audience, and your editors, to ground themselves in your piece and have a sentence to return to time and time again. It is a contract between you and the reader: They'll read your piece and this is what you'll tell them about. The majority of the piece, after stating the thesis, should be dedicated to supporting the thesis statement. Using your thesis to guide your article can help to preempt disorganization of points and the "jumping around" to different subtopics within your broader topic.

3. Supporting Evidence

This is the "meat" of the piece. At this point, you've made your claim, now you need to back it up with credible and concrete evidence. The best opinion pieces usually have at least three supporting pieces of evidence for any of the claims that they make. On the other hand, you could choose to make a series of smaller claims which support your thesis, which you support with different pieces of evidence. Evidence can take the form of news articles or journalism from credible sources, statements or interviews from different people, data aggregated on a trustworthy site or other credible pieces of supporting evidence.

As important as the evidence you bring up is what you do with it. All of the evidence you bring up should have an "analysis" portion. In essence, you need to tie the knot between your claim and your evidence. How exactly does the evidence you brought up support your claim? If you make a smaller claim: How does that smaller claim support your overarching thesis? Analysis portions may differ in size depending on the complexity of the claim and the quality of the evidence.

4. Complexity/Counterargument

After supporting your thesis with a variety of well-sourced evidence, you might be under the impression that no one could ever disagree with your rock-solid argument, the foundations of which you've spent a long time crafting. However, the topics that opinion section arguments fall under, like most topics, are often broad and too encompassing to truthfully encompass in 600 words. Often, people will object to your claims and thesis. It's your duty as a credible writer to preempt these objections and acknowledge them.

After acknowledging one or more counterarguments, you have three options. One, you can qualify the counterargument and give it validity. In this scenario, you must integrate the

counterargument into your main thesis. Two, you can modify the counterargument. Modification of a counterargument means finding some areas where it is either untrue or conceptually flawed. Three, you can outright refute the counterargument and provide evidence for it being entirely factually or conceptually incorrect.

An important note to keep in mind is to never complicate or introduce a counter argument before your main point is clear. Speak in clear terms, first about the main point you're arguing, and then about the complication. It is not the mark of a weak argument to address these things individually.

5. So What?

At this point, your audience agrees with you, but one question remains in their mind: So what? This is your opportunity to capitalize on their newfound appreciation for your topic and perspective. In opinion journalism, this “So what?” often takes the form of a call to action, whether that be calling on an institution for action or calling on the audience themselves to act. However, this section can be much more. For example, pointing out historical continuities or discontinuities are a great way to provide a real weight to your argument — i.e. X happening is emblematic of a greater thing, Y. “So What?” statements give the audience something to chew on and think about themselves, as they leave your piece.

Balancing “Two” Arguments

Many opinion pieces consider two arguments. One, here is an issue and here is why it matters. Two, here's what we should do about it. Depending on the topic and the columnist, these “two” arguments might be balanced in different ways. It's important to recognize, again, what would most resonate with the audience. Do readers of The Daily need to hear more about the issue itself, or about ways we can go about solving it?

III. Writing

“The medium is the message.”

- Marshall McLuhan

Formatting

Generally, **columns are anywhere from 800 to 1,200 words long**. Additionally, it's usually customary that **paragraphs are kept from being longer than five or six lines long**, as bigger block paragraphs run the risk of losing reader engagement. It's advisable to keep the narrative

contained to the first few paragraphs of a piece, as the rest should be dedicated to building an argument from pieces of objective evidence.

Words, Phrases and Sentences

In addition to proper grammar and syntax, in line with the Daily's style guide, you should aim to create a **varied sentence structure** that includes precise wording and makes concise points. A series of long, drawn out sentences will cloud your argument and lose the reader's attention. A varied sentence structure won't. **Avoid unnecessary jargon or wording that could be more clear and concise.** For example, "obfuscate" is much less effective in argument than "complicate." Often, the writer's intention with abstract words or jargon is to make the point seem more widely applicable or more credible; in effect, the argument becomes murkier to readers.

Words like "clearly" and "obviously" impede the quality of arguments because most often what's "clear" and "obvious" is what is being argued. On a deeper level, it conveys the idea that the writer is "talking down" to the audience. Similar phrases and words are "we can all agree," "undoubtedly" and "proves."

Writers should **use active voice** whenever possible, as it is more effective and clear to readers. Verbs imply action.

Phrases like "I think," "I believe," and "In my opinion" are extraneous and implied in this medium. They should be dropped. Similarly, bringing in a counterargument with the phrase "There are some who believe" is often unnecessary and forced.

Don't repeat your message or main claim without considering *what* the repetition will help you achieve. Oftentimes a repeated main claim will barrage and overwhelm your audience, instead of the oft-intended air of clarity. This is to say, **don't hammer in a point more than you need to.** A general rule of thumb: Once you're 80% satisfied with how you have delivered your point, move on.

Interviews and Quotes

Interviews are not only a great way to add credibility to your argument, but also to get educated on the topic you are researching and writing about. Interviews are encouraged in the Opinion section, since much of the content relating to campus and student sentiment does not have any hard, reputable data to back it up. In this way, interviews can serve as great pieces of evidence for arguments relating to campus culture. With this in mind, The Daily has a few standards in terms of properly formatting and using quotes.

Before a quote, the **interviewee should always be introduced with their title, along with the medium of their quote**. If they are a student interviewed by the Daily, this includes their legal name and school within the University (e.g. LSA junior John Doe), along with a statement like “In an interview with The Michigan Daily.” Another sentence or two briefly detailing the following quote helps to introduce the interviewee and their statement.

The quote should then be placed in its own separate paragraph. The quote should not be altered or changed in any way, in order to preserve the truth about what the interviewee said. Following the quote, “[Student’s name] said.” should follow.

After the quote, a paragraph or two should be dedicated to analyzing the content of the quote. If the quote is brought up to support a main claim or refute a counter argument, some sort of analysis should be made that ties the quote back to its original purpose.

Partial quotes should be avoided in all circumstances. If quoting from other mediums, a similar format should be followed. Always attribute quotes to their source, whether that be a Daily interview, other website, press release, video or other medium.

Citations

Because credible evidence is so integral to a strong argument, citations are heavily focused upon and required in the Opinion section. All current or past events, statements, opinions and statistics require a citation, hyperlinked under its respective word or phrase in the piece. A general rule of thumb is to cite everything not abundantly obvious to the average reader; it is far better to over cite than under. Hyperlinks should not be repeated within an article.

With the topic of citations comes the inevitable discussion of what makes a “good” and credible citation. At The Daily, we aim to cite areas of discourse or journalism that have an incentive to tell the truth, somewhat unbiasedly. Reputable news sources like the New York Times, Washington Post and others are encouraged. Columnists should not cite any blatantly politically biased news sources, unless they are citing the opinion of the article itself, nor should they cite anything that includes a paywall. Columnists should also attempt to cite primary sources for anything that they might need — i.e. cite an actual study instead of an article parsing through the study.

Voice

If it's used well, your voice can be the strongest piece of evidence for your argument. It can also be the strongest piece of evidence *against* your argument if used badly. It's important to keep in

mind that *you* are making this argument to your reader. Your voice makes the argument personal to the reader, meaning they are more sensitive to it.

In order for a writer's voice to be credible, they **shouldn't show any bias** in their wording or treatment of a specific topic. For example, using positive or neutral wording when referring to your argument and negative wording when referring to opposing arguments shows a lack of respect to the counterargument, and will encourage the reader to treat your argument with a similar lack of respect as well. In a similar vein, overly-descriptive wording in order to elicit emotion to support your argument should be treated carefully. Sound arguments rely on reasoning. Emotion and passion can motivate the argument, but they should not serve as its foundations.

The writer is speaking *to* the audience, not *at* them. Lean into the audience's natural sense of curiosity. Try to preempt questions that they might have at different points of your piece, and answer them. The goal of opinion journalism is not to tell the audience *what* to think, but to help them parse through the world and community around them.

A good rule of thumb is to read your argument as if you were in opposition to it. **Would the voice of the writer encourage you to keep reading? Or, would it make you question their credibility and dedication to truthfulness?** Be diligent about showing the nuance of an argument. Make the reader believe you have an incentive to tell the truth.

Empathy and Respect

It is easy to make arguments criticizing a policy, administration, person, event or trend. However, this criticism isn't always productive. Blatant opposition, with no upshot, does not serve to push campus dialogue forward. Most objects of criticism exist for a reason. Extending empathy and respect to what you're talking about is a good way to understand the topic on a deeper level, while also working to be productive about what you say.

Don't write off any opponents. Instead, work to understand where they are coming from and why they think the way they do. Understanding your opponents, and writing your piece in a way that continually shows this understanding, creates stronger pieces and signals both respect and intellectual humility on the part of the writer.

When writing about more controversial issues, a heightened sensitivity to how people will perceive the piece is needed. After all, people will not be convinced if they feel disrespected. Any opinions on these topics should be packaged in a way that will make them palatable to the general public. Of course, there are times when an opinion will have friction — especially in these circumstances should the piece remain respectful and empathetic to its audience.

Titles

Article titles should be pertinent to the main argument of the column and be somewhat informative. The audience should be able to tell what the writer's stance is by the title. In general, they should not be longer than 15 words, and, if possible, should be somewhat witty. General cliches should be avoided. Including but not limited to: "It's time to...", "We need to...", "A case for...", "Let's talk about..."

IV. The Process

"Trust the process."

- *Someone, probably*

The editing process ensures that the content that we are producing in the Opinion section is in line with the content vision of the entire Daily. The editing process is not a blackbox. Every step in a piece's journey is an important one, whether it be the pitch process or page read. This section outlines the specific purposes of The Process and the responsibilities of those involved.

1. The Pitch

The Pitch, characteristically due one week before the column, is arguably the most important part of The Process. The pitch sets the tone, angle and argument of the column that is to be written; therefore, it is important that it is in line with the content vision outlined in the previous sections of the handbook. The pitch is there to ensure that the writer doesn't waste their time!

In choosing topics, columnists should interact with the world around them! Read the news, talk to people on campus, listen to the conversations that happen around you. Sometimes the best columns come from unlikely places, so be on the lookout!

Logistically, pitches should be about **one paragraph long**, turned in **via Slack**. They should include a **bolded, clear, well defined thesis**. The thesis should follow all of the guidelines highlighted earlier in the handbook, though it can be more broad. The pitch should also include **2-3 examples of evidence, hyperlinked** into the pitch itself. In terms of evidence, it would also be important to mention what potential interviews you might try to get. We want a clear idea on what the line of reasoning supporting the argument will be. A **counter argument** should be addressed with a hyperlinked example. This is to avoid a potential "strawman" argument (the writer fabricating the extent and scale to which the counter argument exists). A **closing sentence**

on why our audience would benefit from or needs to hear the article. It doesn't have to be final by any means, but **a title** would also be nice.

2. The Edits pt. I

One week after The Pitch, the column is due by 12 p.m. Columnists are expected to meet all deadlines. If a columnist has a valid excuse to miss a deadline, they should inform their senior editor so that the content doc can be adjusted accordingly. If missed deadlines are a recurring issue, further action may be taken. Columns should be put into Google Docs. The name of the document should be the columnists first and last name, along with the number column that it is.

They should include a bolded title along with a specific [design request](#). The design request should paint a descriptive picture of the columnists' desire and reference images can be included. 2023 Design Managing Editor Abby Schreck says "Please be nice to us." Also, 2023 Design Managing Editor Sophie Grand says "Don't fuck up the design form."

On the production night that the column is due, the columnist's senior editor will edit the column. They should make edits based on the previous guidelines, including argument, syntax, conciseness and other areas of pertinence to the senior editor and the Opinion section. These initial edits will be more in-depth compared to the subsequent edits that happen to the piece. For that reason, the senior editor will send the edits back to the columnist.

The columnist is expected to do their edits by the production day three days after the column was due at 12 p.m. They should accept most edits and attend to all comments made by the senior editor. If some edits are more stylistic than others, columnists can have more leeway with how they choose to address them. Any questions at this should be directed to the senior editors.

3. The Edits pt. II, the lesser known and hopefully less lengthy sequel

The Editorial Page Editors will then make edits smaller than a paragraph in length. Anything longer and the EPE sends back the column to the columnist. Ideally, the EPE edits will attempt to preempt the copy edits and make minute changes. The overall content and structure of the argument should already be in great shape! After Copy makes their edits, the EPE moves their edits to page read.

4. Page read and publication

After addressing all relevant copy edits, articles in page read are ready to be published. In page read, the senior editors working that night, as well as the editor(s) in chief doing final reads on Opinion content, will make comments about the content ready to be published. If edits are extensive, then the column will be sent back to the columnist for them to address. If all goes well, minor edits will be made and the column will be published.

Relevant Links

- [Daily Style Guide](#)
- [Tips for good design requests](#)