

# 10 tips for commentary writers

So you want to change the world? Or at least offer a few thoughts to challenge the latest view raging on social media? Here is a short guide.

1. **Use a “newshook.”** Why are we talking about this topic today? Is it commentary about the governor’s decision to sign or veto legislation? Do you have something to say about the revelation that Volkswagen AG had installed software on its cars to lie about the emissions? Do you have a view on parenting and technology?
2. **Write about what you know.** First-hand knowledge always will produce powerful and persuasive commentary.
3. **Frame your topic** in a way that makes it entertaining to read. Commentary that finds a cross-section between public policy and popular culture will find readers. Commentary that talks about something readers don’t understand, e.g., the Greek financial crisis, in terms of something they do understand, e.g., how much income it takes to survive, will win readers.
4. **Grab the reader** with the first paragraph. Use lively language to explain as succinctly as you can what you want the reader to do and why. Readers increasingly read news and commentary on their cell phones. If the gist isn’t in what they can see at the top, they will not scroll down to read more.
5. **Use a story** or an anecdote to make your points. Readers will grasp -- and remember -- a short story better than a dry policy point.
6. **Support your points with facts.** Use hypertext links to original documents. If you cite a paper or poll or quote the pope, include information that tells the reader when, and where something was said or reported. This will give your commentary credibility.
7. **Keep it short.** Readers are pressed for time and will avoid long pieces. The Chronicle looks for pieces in the 500-to-750-word range. Some topics work well in 300 or fewer words. Some need more words.
8. **A classic, five-paragraph essay format usually works well.** Introduce your thesis. Use the next three paragraphs to support it. Use the last paragraph to sum up your points and sell your idea.
9. **Write in a conversational tone.** You essentially are writing for an eighth-grade-reading level. Avoid multisyllabic words. Use short, powerful, active voice verbs. Keep your sentences short and avoid long clauses. Think: How would you make your point if you were chatting casually with people at a party?
10. **Give the reader a role.** The goal of these pieces is to engage readers in the public debate, the cultural conversation -- basically, democracy. Ask the reader to help you further your cause. Give him or her specific steps to take. Ask them to vote. Or to contact their representative in the Legislature or Congress. Or to join an event -- a rally, a march, a lecture, a workshop or kid’s event. Or to support the school’s decision to adopt a new curriculum. Or to take some individual action. Maybe the call to action is: Educate yourself. Provide a short list of ways the reader can do that.