

ROGUE ACTION CENTER

Tools for Organizing: Writing Op-Eds

1. **Be strategic in choosing the author(s).**

- Someone the editors might like because well known (such as politician or religious leader) or unusual (such as surprising ally or a person with a gripping story to tell).
- Someone who helps build broad public support.
- Should be seen as having particular expertise or personal experience on the issue.
- Normally just one person, but sometimes works to have co-authors who make an interesting or surprising combination. Very rarely more than two.

2. **The headline, first two sentences, and closing sentences are critical** because that's all the editor may read when deciding whether to consider it for publication.

The first two sentences should...

- Catch readers' attention through use of a provocative question, surprising statement, or interesting juxtaposition.

All schoolchildren should be provided with a learning environment in which the roof and pipes don't leak, the electrical system poses no hazards and the classroom air isn't tainted with asbestos, lead, mold or other toxic contaminants. Yet, New Jersey today gets an "F" for failing to meet that responsibility.

- Raise a broad public policy issue (that's what makes this an op-ed and not something that belongs on news pages) and establish the connection to the public interest.
- If possible, tie into current news.

The headline should be short, catchy, and convey the main theme: "Gov. Christie Gets an F on Student Safety." Editors may not use it, but it affects their impression of whether your op-ed is worth publishing and may affect the headline they write.

The last paragraph should play off the lead sentences to leave a lasting impression:

Our children go to school to learn, but these days, the main lesson we seem to be teaching them is that their health and safety is not as important as adding even more to the wealth of those at the top. Our elected officials surely can do better.

- ### 3. **The text should "show" rather than "claim."** Present hard facts, case studies, quotes, and real-life anecdotes – not rhetoric and unsubstantiated assertions.
- ### 4. **The tone throughout should be thoughtful and rational** – not alarmist, nasty, sarcastic, or personal. Don't attack the newspaper's editors. Don't use exclamation marks.
- ### 5. **Keep it short** – no more than the paper's word limit.
- ### 6. **Don't repeat opposition arguments for them.** When responding to an opponent's op-ed or hostile editorial, start with your main message – not theirs. When you refer to opposition arguments, do so indirectly or re-frame them the way we see them:

“Nursing home owners in West Virginia have sought to downplay their own problems by arguing that companies in other states are even worse.”

- 7. Don't be obvious about tooting your own horn.** Editors will stop reading if an op-ed sounds like a press release, as in: *“More than 10,000 union janitors have just won a groundbreaking contract that provides good wages, health insurance, and full-time jobs.”*

Note: The headlines on these examples are the headlines the newspaper editors put on when the op-eds were printed.

Newark Star-Ledger, Nov. 15, 2011

In land of rich, we're poor at fixing schools

By Eileen Senn

All schoolchildren should be provided with a learning environment in which the roof and pipes don't leak, the electrical system poses no hazards and the classroom air isn't tainted with asbestos, lead, mold or other toxic contaminants. Yet New Jersey today gets an "F" for failing to meet that responsibility.

New Jersey has the third-highest rate of millionaires and billionaires in the country. Our state stands to lose more than \$1 billion from corporate tax loopholes created in Gov. Chris Christie's first two years in office, according to the New Jersey Policy Perspective research center. Yet the governor says we can't afford to provide all of our children safe, modern places to learn.

New Jersey residents desperately need work. School repair and modernization would be one good place to start. Yet Christie has helped pay for the new corporate giveaways by ordering a halt to hundreds of essential school repair projects already approved after inspections by the Department of Education. He also stopped action on at least 53 badly needed school construction projects, according to the nonpartisan and independent Education Law Center.

As a health and safety expert with more than 40 years of experience, I researched the condition of New Jersey schools this year. Using the Open Public Records Act, I obtained reports showing that our children are facing widespread and preventable hazards every day.

One project designated for action by Department of Education inspections but blocked by the Christie administration was to repair the wall of an elementary school gym that was falling down. Other projects that were blocked included replacement of a junior high school's structurally unsound roof and a ceiling at an elementary school that was getting ready to fall in. Another was to fix water and sewer leaks at a high school.

Our state also gets an "F" when it comes to modernizing our schools with money-saving, energy-efficiency measures and 21st century technology. The BlueGreen Alliance estimates that each school that is made energy efficient saves an average of \$100,000 per year on operational expenses.

President Obama has asked Congress to invest in some school repairs as part of the American Jobs Act of 2011. But even if congressional leaders drop their opposition, that legislation would provide only a start on covering our school repair and modernization needs. New Jersey will need to do its part as well.

Wall Street and corporate CEOs are making more money and taking a larger share of our wealth than at any time in history. According to Forbes magazine, there are four New Jersey residents who have net worth totals of \$10.6 billion. To put that in perspective, those four individuals alone have more than three times the \$2.9 billion the Legislature allocated for school construction that Christie has blocked.

Our children go to school to learn, but these days, the main lesson we seem to be teaching them is that their health and safety and their future are not as important as adding even more to the wealth of those at the top. Elected officials, including Chris Christie, surely can do better.

Eileen Senn is an industrial hygiene consultant for the New Jersey Work Environment Council.

Philadelphia Inquirer, Dec. 15, 2008

New law would ensure right to sue

By Nan Aron and David Kairys

Imagine someone rams into your car on the Schuylkill Expressway, causing you serious, permanent injury and costing you your livelihood.

Then imagine the courts say you can't sue for damages because the other person had a driver's license, which proves he is a safe driver and therefore immune from legal responsibility. Or that, although the driver who rammed you was going 50 m.p.h. on an ice-covered highway, he is not liable because that was under the posted speed limit.

Sounds crazy, doesn't it? But when the new Congress convenes next month, it will consider whether that kind of immunity should be granted to big corporations whose products do serious harm to Americans. Our own Sen. Arlen Specter, the ranking Republican on the Judiciary Committee, could play an important role.

Based on a controversial interpretation of a federal law passed in the 1970s, the Supreme Court ruled this year that Americans can't sue corporations that manufacture harmful or faulty medical devices if the Food and Drug Administration allowed the device to be marketed. The case effectively precludes relief for anyone harmed by, for example, an FDA-approved but faulty defibrillator, heart pump, artificial heart valve, or hip replacement.

The ruling takes away the long-standing rights of Americans such as Bridget Robb, 34, a mother from Gwynedd. Robb's heart received 31 unintended electrical shocks from her defibrillator within a few minutes due to a malfunction of equipment manufactured by Medtronic, she testified before the Judiciary Committee in June. The Supreme Court's new ruling apparently will prevent her from recovering the cost of the operations and trauma she suffered as a result.

The Supreme Court recently heard a case that could deny the same rights to Americans harmed by prescription drugs. Many drugs marketed with federal permission have caused serious harm later on, including Vioxx, Zolof, fen-phen, Avandia and Celebrex.

The FDA's own experts have said agency approval to market is based only on the evidence available at the time, much of which comes from the drug companies themselves. FDA approval to market is a tentative, minimal permission to sell a drug or device, not an assurance of safety or a basis for corporate immunity.

But the Bush administration has nevertheless supported this attack on Americans' legal rights. Already, it has inserted this new protection for big corporations into more than 60 regulations, removing a powerful incentive for manufacturers to ensure the safety of a medication, car seat, crib, toy or other product. If a manufacturer's paid experts and lobbyists can get an initial OK from a regulatory agency, there's no liability later - no matter how bad their conduct or widespread the harm.

The new Congress and President-elect Barack Obama will have an opportunity to enact legislation ensuring that regulatory approval to market does not relieve manufacturers of responsibility. They can also appoint federal judges who understand that our legal system is supposed to protect the rights and health of Americans, not just corporations.

Nan Aron, president of the Alliance for Justice, who heads a coalition of more than 80 public-interest groups, can be reached at nan@afj.org. David Kairys, a professor of law at Temple who wrote "Philadelphia Freedom: Memoir of a Civil Rights Lawyer," is at dkairys@temple.edu.