

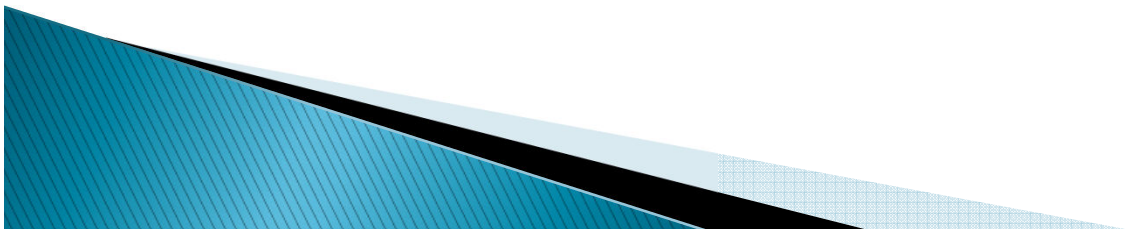
Opinion writing: Letters to the editor, Opeds



...or how to shape public opinion in
supporting TRIO programs

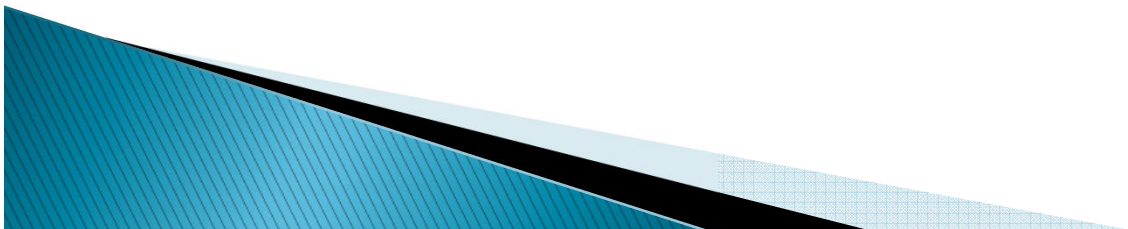
Intros.....

- ▶ CaseyInk: PR, editing/writing to mold opinion
- ▶ 34 years in commentary/editorial writing for 4 newspapers, including the NY Times
- ▶ Editor for 10 years of 6–page, weekly commentary section for daily newspaper in CT
- ▶ Editor for the Oped Project, which seeks to increase minorities, women in opinion writing



Commentary gold.....

- ▶ ...is putting a local angle on a national story. This gives the national story meaning.
- ▶ That combination opens doors of large publications & many shares on social media.
- ▶ You have that right now in your inspiring stories of students coupled with the current crisis involving changes in the Higher Education Act.
- ▶ Let's look at the HEA issue first, and then discuss how to *combine it with your local story* in letters and opeds.



The Problem

- ▶ The Higher Education Act pays for many financial aid/support programs, including all TRIO programs. Congress has reauthorized it 8 times since 1965.
- ▶ *But this year is different.*
- ▶ Proposed changes to the HEA, or PROSPER Act, are radical. They would:
- ▶ Require colleges applying for TRIO programs to pay 20 percent of cost. This is new! Federal government has always covered 100% of cost.



...the nightmare continues...

- ▶ Gives the Secretary of Education power to set aside 10 percent of TRIO money for new applications or evaluation programs, leaving less money for students currently served by the program.
- ▶ The proposed law punishes institutions that invest their own resources into helping low-income or first-gen students. How? By limiting their eligibility for TRIO grants.
- ▶ Other proposals in the bill would eliminate the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program and the Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant



The upshot? If passed.....

- ▶ Passage would cause radical change.
- ▶ Fewer colleges would host TRIO programs.
- ▶ Fewer students would be helped – even though current TRIO programs cover just 2 percent of all eligible students.
- ▶ Millions of dollars would be spent at the Secretary's discretion on programs of unknown quality.



The Opportunity: Letters, opeds

- ▶ Opinion drives online traffic. Opeds are so called because the commentary was published **OP**posite the **ED**itorial page. Spotlights issues that matter.
- ▶ Newspapers: Down, but not out; 1,300-plus U.S. dailies; circulation, online readership: 60 million+.
- ▶ Newspapers want local & statewide commentary because it's more interesting and they don't have to pay for it, unlike syndicated columns.



Your voice matters

- ▶ Informing public: People will not support TRIO programs without knowledge.
- ▶ Attracting policymakers' support: Congressmen and staff read opeds and letters.
- ▶ Broadcasters read newspapers to develop stories.
- ▶ Publicity: Student support TRIO programs are higher ed's best-kept secrets.



How to start?

- ▶ Usually, I ask my clients 3 crucial questions that all editors ask. You already can answer all of these:
- ▶ 1) Why you? (You have expertise in TRIO)
- ▶ 2) Why now? (It's a current, important issue)
- ▶ 3) Who cares? (See number 2)



Length matters

- ▶ Opeds are usually 650–700 words
- ▶ Letters are usually 200 words or less
- ▶ Check with local publication.
- ▶ Editors LOVE concise writing that they don't have to work so hard to edit it.
- ▶ Both need to be interesting. Being boring is the kiss of death.



Keys to great opinion writing

- ▶ All great opinion writing makes readers feel mad, glad, or sad – and makes them think.
- ▶ Begin in a way that grabs the reader.
- ▶ Tell a story.
- ▶ Write simply (short words, sentences).



First, letters

- ▶ Boil down your comments to their essence *because you must*. Word length is critical.
- ▶ Example: Maureen Hoyler's letter to NYT
 - Goal: Add info to a just-published story on struggling low-income students that did NOT mention TRIO
 - 150 words is limit; Maureen's was 121 words
 - Bare bones but effective: 4 sentences long
 - NYT daily reach: 9.32 million



Maureen's Letter:

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/2nELclE>

Opinion | LETTER

Help for Low-Income College Students

MARCH 31, 2017

To the Editor:

"For Many, College Is the Goal; the Problem Is Getting There" (front page, March 25) underscores the need for more government support, not less, for the set of federal programs that help low-income students prepare for and gain entrance into college.

The too little money allocated for such programs serves only 2 percent of eligible students, yet President Trump's proposed budget would cut funding by 10 percent and result in a loss of services to 83,000 students.

If the students in the article had gained access to federal programs like Talent Search and Upward Bound, they would have found more support and preparation to take the first steps toward the college education that will both brighten their futures and strengthen our country.

Cutting such badly needed programs is woefully shortsighted in light of the obvious need.

MAUREEN HOYLER, WASHINGTON

The writer is president and chief executive of the Council for Opportunity in Education, a nonprofit.



Takeaways:

- ▶ Short? Yep.
- ▶ Did Maureen want to say more? Yep.
- ▶ But boiling down your message, as she did, will make it more likely to be published.
- ▶ **The COE website can help.** Click on “advocacy,” then “advocacy tool.” Plug in your zip code for nearest media to you, their websites and info
- ▶ **www.coenet.org/congress_web.shtml#/media**



Opeds: In the beginning...

- ▶ ...was a great lead, hook, or “lede.” It is the front door to your piece. Spend time on it.
- ▶ An anecdotal lede hooks the reader. You have dozens of great stories in your programs. Start with one. Example:
- ▶ “Sally Smith worked two jobs to support her ailing mother, but thought that college was beyond her reach. With the help of Upward Bound she is enrolled in XXX State. But a proposal in Congress may make it less likely that Sally, and people like her, will get the help they need.”



Stories make your points vivid

- ▶ Stories especially make statistics easier to absorb.
- ▶ Boiling down an anecdote to even one sentence can have an impact:
- ▶ “With the help of the federal Upward Bound program, 10 of our students who are the first in their families to attend college enrolled this year at Excel U. Proposed changes in Congress may make such success stories rarer.”



Jargon is not your friend

- ▶ Use simple language, not jargon. That means, don't use "TRIO" without defining it, because the term is unfamiliar to the general public.
- ▶ Simple definition is best: "TRIO is a set of federal programs that help low-income and first-generation students (i.e., those whose parents did not graduate from college) gain access to college."
- ▶ Notice that I defined "first generation." That, too, is an example of jargon.



Basic oped outline

- ▶ Lede – introduce the subject, possibly with a story.
- ▶ Thesis statement in one paragraph. TRIO programs are threatened, and that will hurt not just individual students, but the country, & why.
- ▶ Point one
- ▶ Point two
- ▶ Point three
- ▶ Conclusion, can be one that refers to the lede to reinforce the reason you are writing – “bookending”



Sending in your piece

- ▶ Follow publication guideline.
- ▶ Don't attach document to email. Paste your copy in the body of the email; many places will reject emails with attachments.
- ▶ Use compelling subject line: "Program cuts threaten students"
- ▶ If you call about your oped, have an elevator speech. But first ask, "Are you on deadline?" Don't call on Friday. Morning is usually best.
- ▶ If you send email, early Mon. morning is good to get at top of email list
- ▶ Call if you haven't heard after several days, but don't drive editors nuts. For a daily paper, don't call on Friday.



Share and amplify message

- ▶ When oped or letter appears, share widely on social media channels with link to article.
 - Name your members of Congress, e.g. @chrismurphy. This turns up in their alerts and their followers' alerts.
- ▶ Have a pointed, compelling tweet or post headline
 - Not “Our p.o.v. on TRIO.”
 - More like: “New bill could block entry to college for thousands of (name state) students.”



Websites, etc.

- ▶ www.theopedproject.org -- many, many tools for writing and pitching opeds
- ▶ My email: maura@caseyink.com; website is www.caseyink.com
- ▶ COE's very cool advocacy tool for finding nearby outlets with the click of a mouse:
- ▶ www.coenet.org/congress_web.shtml#/media

