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What is an opinion article

Why newspapers still have opinion pagesOpinion pages in newspapers date back to Colonial times, and the America we know and love today is here thanks to them.You've probably heard the term op-ed a lot recently. The New York Times' decision to publish an anonymous op-ed from a "senior official" in the Trump administration pulled the term into the national spotlight.The op-ed has left people, including the president, asking who wrote this? What was the author's motive? Why would the Times agree to withhold the author's name? They're all valid questions, and ones we may never get answers to.But we know from social media and data from search providers that it also left many people asking, what is an op-ed? As journalists, we have a responsibility to ensure our readers understand the terms we use. Opinion sections publish several different types of content in the spirit of presenting a wide range of viewpoints and to encourage thoughtful debate. All of the different terms can get confusing. Here's a primer on all of the terms we use to describe content appearing in the Register's Opinion section.What is an op-ed?An op-ed, short for opposite editorial, is an opinionated article submitted to a newspaper for publication. They are written by members of the community, not newspaper employees.Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines them as "an essay in a newspaper or magazine that gives the opinion of the writer and that is written by someone who is not employed by the newspaper or magazine."In the Register, most op-eds are labeled as "Your Turn" or "Iowa View." They can also be called guest columns. Op-eds can range from public policy debates to first-person experiences. SUPPORT LOCAL JOURNALISM: Start a Des Moines Register subscription todayHOW TO: Submit a guest essayIn recent weeks, we've published op-eds from Rob Tibbetts about how he didn't want his daughter Mollie's name used in immigration debates, advocates worried about how the Monsanto-Bayer merger will hurt farmers, a working mother on the need for the FAMILY Act to pass the U.S. Senate and Vice President Mike Pence touting the country's economic success before a visit to Des Moines.Op-eds give the Register's opinion pages the opportunity to present views we wouldn't normally be able to publish. Opinion Editor Kathie Obradovich and planning editor James Kramer sift through dozens of submissions each week to decide which op-eds are published.What's an editorial?An editorial is an opinion article that states the position of a publication's editorial board, which usually consists of top editors and opinion writers. At the Register, that board includes Obradovich, Executive Editor Carol Hunter, Editorial Writer Andie Dominick and retired Register staffers Richard Doak and Rox Laird. Recent editorials have questioned why Iowa's schools are suspending an increasing number of elementary students, advocated for making E-Verify mandatory as part of larger immigration reform and challenged lawmakers to ensure the war against opioids didn't leave cancer patients in pain.Andie Dominick was awarded the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing for a selection of editorials on health care and the state's decision to privatize Medicaid. The Pulitzer Prize citation states that Dominick won "for examining in a clear, indignant voice, free of cliché or sentimentality, the damaging consequences for poor Iowa residents of privatizing the state's administration of Medicaid." Dominick was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2014 for a series of editorials challenging Iowa's licensing laws that regulate occupations ranging from cosmetologists to dentists and often protect practitioners more than the public. The Register also won Pulitzer Prizes for editorial writing in 1956, 1943 and 1938.RELATED: Why do newspapers still have editorials?Here's how the New York Times describes its editorial board: "Their primary responsibility is to write The Times's editorials, which represent the voice of the board, its editor and the publisher. The board is part of the Opinion department, which is operated separately from The Times's newsroom, and includes the Letters to the Editor and Op-Ed sections."The Register uses the same separation in its newsroom.What's a column?A column is an article that often — but not always — contains opinions. Op-eds can be a type of column. Columnists are often some of the most well-known names at a news organization. The Register's columnists include Rekha Basu (opinion), Iowa Columnist Courtney Crowder, Randy Peterson (Iowa State athletics), Chad Leistikow (Iowa athletics), Reader's Watchdog Lee Rood and Metro Columnist Daniel P. Finney. Obradovich was a political columnist before becoming opinion editor and continues to write columns. Though uncommon, reporters occasionally express opinions by writing columns about topics on their beat.Columns can be personal stories, like when Crowder wrote about crying at an "American Idol" concert, or calls to action, like when Obradovich wrote about the need for politicians to address mental health care in Iowa.In addition to its staff columnists, the Register publishes columns from contributor Joel Kurtinitis and syndicated columns from writers like Leonard Pitts, Marc A. Thiessen and John Kass.What's a letter to the editor?A letter to the editor is a shorter, usually opinionated article written by a reader who wants to share an opinion about something they've just read or seen.You can submit your own letter at DesMoinesRegister.com/Letters.Submissions should be short — 200 words or less is ideal — but they can be about the topic of a reader's choosing. They can share a political opinion, criticize something the Register published or thank a helpful stranger. All of these different types of content can be found on Opinion pages both online and in print of publications across the country.Still left with questions?As I wrote at the start of this article, it's up to journalists to ensure our readers understand the terms we use. If you're still unsure or you see another journalism term you don't understand, reach out to me and let's chat about it.Brian Smith is the Register's engagement editor and served as a member of its editorial board from 2014-2017. He's a native Iowan and graduate of Iowa State University. Brian works with Register journalists to help them connect with Iowans through social media, events and more. Reach him at bsmith@dmreg.com, 515-284-8214, @SmithBM12 on Twitter or at Facebook.com/SmithBM12 — USA TODAY NETWORK'S Ethan May contributed to this report. An opinion piece was traditionally published in print media opposite the editorial page (hence the term "op-ed"). These articles generally come from an author not affiliated with the media publisher and are used to publish an opinion that is meant to create thought and discussion among readers. Sometimes people or organizations in positions of influence, respect, social status, or expertise need assistance writing and effectively communicating their educated opinions. Often, they turn to freelance writers for assistance. Generally, op-eds are used to reflect opinions of an author or group. They are usually longer than a regular letter to the editor, often being written by a subject matter expert or otherwise notable person with the qualifications to have an opinion (or written by someone else for them). A freelancer will sometimes be used as a ghostwriter—writing using someone else's byline. Additionally, public relations firms often write these articles, in attempts to forward an agenda. The op-ed is then published in a spot where it will be noticed, either in the traditional spot opposite the editorial in printed media, or somewhere on a website where viewers will see it. These opinion pieces are relevant articles written to address popular or unknown issues, or in response to opinions expressed elsewhere. Often, a biographical paragraph or two accompanies the piece to lend credence to it and the author. Sometimes, a photo of the author accompanies the piece in the biography portion. If you are a freelance writer and have found a client who needs an op-ed written, there are a few key concepts you should use when submitting an opinion article. You'll have to be clear on the opinion, know how to hook the readers, understand the audience, back up the opinion with facts, follow any formatting rules, and give the readers a call to action. The client will generally dictate the opinion for you, and give you the main points they would like to have covered. You may have written for them for a long time and are familiar with their opinions—it still helps to be sure that you understand their goals and thoughts on the issues, as opinions and outlooks can change over time. When you are given someone else's opinion to write about, it can be difficult to agree with it. One problem ghostwriters have is not agreeing with a topic they are writing about which can cause problems writing an effective piece. You want to assume an adopting role of the opinion until the work is finished, which can allow you to write better for the entity you are creating content for. Know what the desired effect of the op-ed is—whether it be a call to action, or a call for further thought. This will give you an idea of how you can sway or reinforce the reader's thoughts on the topic. Your reader is going to make a decision within the first few sentences whether or not the piece is worth reading. It's a good idea to start by introducing the issue along with a story that personalizes it. Be brief and make sure the hook is relevant to the issue. For example, if you have witnessed a violent crime, and the op-ed supports measures to reduce crimes, you could briefly tell a story about it to make it relatable. Be familiar with the audience—think of who reads the medium the article will be published on, and who reads about the issue you're addressing. This might assist you in making decisions about the kinds of words you use (e. g., technical terms or jargon), or what kinds of stories you tell. Avoid industry-speak and jargon to reduce topic confusion and audience limitation. Explain concepts to broaden the understanding for readers that are not industry experts. Opinions need evidence and support. Generally, data and statistics are used to reinforce the points being made. Historical facts and figures can be used to help bolster the case being made as well. It's important to follow the style guidelines and word count given by the publication the piece is going to be published in. This reduces the amount of editing that may be needed to get the article up to par and reduces the time spent going back and forth between you, your client, and their publisher. Don't leave your readers wondering what comes next, or what they can do about a particular issue. You should leave them with a call to action, and give them some actions they can take. For example, if the issue is supported by candidates running for office, you might tell your readers to cast their votes for the candidate in their district that reflects the opinion in the article. Op-eds are opinion based articles.These pieces are sometimes contracted out to freelancers for ghostwriting.Op-eds should be backed with facts, figures, and statistics to be credible.

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