

Tips for Writing Persuasive Policy Commentary

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Policy commentaries and op-eds are powerful weapons. Wielded effectively, they can raise public awareness of important issues, influence expert debates, and prompt government action.

Writing commentaries is a very different task from writing longer pieces like magazine articles, policy analyses, or research papers. Like all writing, commentary writing is a learned skill, not something we are born knowing how to do. This short guide provides advice for writing persuasive policy commentaries and addresses the most common problems in the work of people who are new to the game.

Tip 1. Pick a narrow and very specific topic.

Though they take many forms, commentaries typically follow one of a few basic approaches:

1. Criticizing an existing policy that is not working
2. Proposing a new policy (sometimes in combination with #1)
3. Alerting people to a new or underappreciated problem/trend/issue
4. Interpreting the meaning of major events (and correcting misimpressions)

The best commentaries focus on a very specific aspect of a topic. It is very difficult to make insightful and provocative arguments if your topic is too broad because your argument will lack the required level of detail and specificity to be persuasive. This just gets worse given the word limits you will face. Commentary pieces by definition are quite short. Though you might occasionally get the chance to write a longer essay, the sweet spot for commentary writing is between 500 words and about 1500 words (700 is about right for most newspapers). This means you do not have time to take on multiple topics in depth.

The solution is to carve out a specific topic and to make a concise and focused argument about it.

Example

Too broad

“The US should do more to deal with cyber threats.”

This one is too broad because framing it this way means you have to discuss all cyber threats...too much even for a book let alone an op-ed!

Better

“The US should provide cyber insurance to U.S. companies to encourage them to cooperate with the US government on cyber security.”

This narrower approach allows you to ignore all other issues and focus on just one important piece of the puzzle. With this tight focus you can really do a great job convincing people in detail of why this is a good idea.

Tip 2. Start with the punch line

Perhaps the most common mistake of aspiring commentary writers is the failure to tell readers the punch line up front. As with any piece of persuasive writing, you should begin your work with a short summary introduction. In a *concise* manner (i.e. no more than a short paragraph) your introduction must:

1. Identify your topic very clearly
2. Explain why that topic matters right now
3. Describe the political/policy context
4. Provide the readers with your main argument

If you don't do this, your readers won't know what you're trying to do and will have more trouble following and appreciating your argument. Think of the introduction like a prosecutor's opening argument. It would be weird to present a bunch of evidence and discussion and only afterwards mention the crime for which you were trying to get a conviction. Alternatively, the old saw about speeches and writing holds for commentaries: tell them what you're going to tell them; tell them; tell them what you've told them.

Example

Russia's push to support Assad in Syria and its agreement to share intelligence with Syria, Iran, and Iraq has evoked the predictable handwringing here in the United States. Some worry that Russian involvement will derail the U.S. fight against IS. Others worry that Russia's engagement will weaken U.S. influence in the Middle East and further embolden Vladimir Putin in his various misadventures. Such concerns are misplaced. Even though Putin has no intention of helping the United States his maneuverings have in fact done just that. Rather than ramping up U.S. engagement to outdo the Russians, as hawks are calling for, Obama should instead take this opportunity to reassess and redirect U.S. policy.

This paragraph from a recent commentary 1) lets the reader know the topic; 2) clarifies the "so what" of the piece by referring to the reasons for handwringing; 3) acknowledges that there is political disagreement in the U.S. over this by taking a position against the hawks, and 4) ends by providing a one sentence summary of the main argument. Readers finishing this paragraph will now (correctly) expect the rest of the piece to provide support for that assertion.

Tip 3. Focus on analysis, not description

The role of commentary pieces in the marketplace of ideas is to provide persuasive arguments, not to present detailed research findings, describe historical events, or report on current events. When necessary, descriptions of background or history should aim to illustrate the key themes relevant to current policy debates. Likewise, when you are making a case for a policy option, your commentary must persuade through logical argument, not simple recitation of facts and assertions.

Example

Description: Sheik Ahmed Yassin founded Hamas in 1987 to create an Islamic state in Palestine.

Analysis: Three major factors led Sheik Ahmed Yassin to found Hamas in 1987.

Tip #4 Write for success

There are many ways to produce “good” writing, but there is only one way to write for professional policy audiences. In a nutshell that approach can be summarized with the following rules:

- a. Do not use slang
- b. Do not communicate your personal feelings
- c. Make sure there are no spelling or grammatical errors
- d. Avoid run on sentences and awkward or vague wording
- e. Write for a generalist audience and don’t assume technical knowledge
- f. Avoid the passive voice and other weasel-y ways of not being clear
- g. Do not write to “look smart.” Write to be understood.

I highly recommend giving your piece to a friend, partner, or colleague (or all of the above) and asking them for comments before you send your work to editors, bosses, etc. They will help you catch stupid mistakes, errors in logic, and fuzzy patches that you are unable to see after you’ve been working on it for too long.