

Opinion Editorials

The “op-ed” (opinion editorial) page is the place to try to publish your commentary on FNPS mission oriented issues and topics. Guest commentaries are articles that appear opposite the editorial page of local and state newspapers. Many op-eds are written by local citizens, experts and leaders of organizations - people like **you**. They are an extremely powerful and cost-effective way for your chapter to educate a large number of people about your issues and to influence policymakers.

Who reads opinion pieces?

Opinion articles are usually read by policymakers, academics, and important decision-makers. If your goal is to reach the general public, an op-ed in the local/regional paper is the way to go.

Do Your Homework

Although most newspapers consider it a priority to maintain open access to their opinion pages, not all papers are receptive to publishing guest pieces from anyone. If you want to write on behalf of your FNPS chapter, it is important to know the paper's policies and to have researched your topic thoroughly to express scientific data and facts. It is also important to know the FNPS policy statement on the issue. The FNPS President, Policy & Legislative Committee and other committees can lend support and research.

Contacting the Paper

Once you know what you want to write, you should try discussing it with the person in charge of op-eds or commentaries. Explain what you want to write in response to something that has been printed in the paper, your particular issue or that you want to express your views on an ongoing subject/issue. Ask them their opinion, take any guidance they are willing to offer. Many newspapers also have recorded messages or websites outlining their guidelines for submitting op-eds. Before writing, make sure you get the following information:

1. Word length
2. How to submit
3. Whom to submit to
4. How long submissions are held on to/considered and how to find out whether it has been accepted for publication
5. Details on how to withdraw submissions

Timing is Everything

Timing is the most important factor in submitting an op-ed. Is the state legislature about to cast a controversial vote? Is there a pending local decision that will affect a conservation area? Can you tie the op-ed to the release of a new report, a recent article, or event in your community? In many cases, it is best to submit your op-ed well in advance of a timely event, because editors plan their opinion pages a week or more in advance. When reacting to a news event, submit your piece as quickly as possible afterwards - no more than a week after it has been covered by the newspaper, preferably within two or three days.

Writing an Op-Ed

Start by outlining what you want to write - not only the issue but the point of view you want to take. Consider what the paper has already printed on the subject and decide how you could best contribute to the debate. *Tips:*

- Keep your text to between 500 and 800 words (about 3 pages double-spaced) in general, but ensure you are submitting it their guidelines.
- Stay focused on one issue, and boil your argument down to three or, at the most, four major points.
- Think creatively and try to be original.
- Highlight the issue's relevance. How/why is it important?
- Write in short paragraphs
- Use simple, short sentences. Avoid fancy words, jargon, or acronyms.
- Eliminate the passive voice. Example: "This legislation was defeated almost entirely by the governor." Changed to: "The governor single-handedly defeated the bill."
- Begin with a short vignette illustrating how the issue affects the community to drive home why the newspaper's readers "need to know."
- Include at least one memorable phrase that can be used as a "pull" quote. It must be short.
- Op-eds should provoke discussion and response.
- Op-eds should be informative and provide practical solutions for the problem you have presented.
- Close on a strong note. Use a short, powerful last paragraph that drives the point home and sums things up.
- Don't forget to thank the editor, or whomever you are dealing with at the paper, for publishing your op-ed piece afterwards. A good relationship with the editorial staff could become one of your most valuable resources.
- Include a cover letter when submitting an op-ed that summarizes why it is timely and of interest to readers of this particular publication. Thank the editors for considering your piece. Keep this letter short - less than one page.

The Right Author

You do not necessarily have to sign or write an op-ed by yourself. Sometimes it is best to write a draft and ask an expert, the FNPS President or FNPS Executive Committee member to collaborate on an opinion piece. Finding the best author to collaborate with can be critical in getting your article published and maximizing its impact. Choose from scientific or other experts from FNPS or other organizations (The Nature Conservancy, Water Management Districts, etc.),

Formatting an Op-Ed

- Double space your text.
- Provide a suggested title, the author's name, and identification - although it will most likely be re-named.
- You may want to include a short biographical paragraph about the author(s) at the end, including residence and experience relevant to the topic.
- Consider illustrating your piece with a photograph or map.