Know your publication

One of the worst things you can do when writing is to write in a manner inconsistent with your target medium. Just as you adopt a different tone in letters asking Mom for money than you would in a letter asking for a loan, you also must know the conventions of the place where your writing will be read.

In this case, you are "publishing" in a newspaper or newsletter, so you should be aware that newspaper articles have *very short paragraphs*. In general, no more than two or three sentences make up a typical paragraph.

The most important consideration about shorter paragraphs is that they are easier for readers to read. Long unbroken blocks of text are daunting to most readers. Frequent paragraphs promise a sort of "rest stop" to readers.

Don't feel you need to keep your paragraphs wholly unified and long. In newspaper writing it is perfectly legitimate to begin new paragraphs often, even if it means continuing a thought begun in an earlier paragraph. If you've been paying attention at all, you'll notice that I have been doing just that throughout this assignment sheet.

Another consideration about newspaper writing is that you must *grab the reader's attention quickly*. Newspapers are meant to be read quickly, and rarely are they ever read again. And if an article is not interesting, readers generally will not bother finishing it.

For that reason, it is crucial that you begin with a good *lead*, an opening sentence that "hooks" readers immediately and makes them want to read on. A good lead tantalizes, informs, and sets the tone for the piece. It can even be creative. For instance, an editorial on gambling in the *Wall Street Journal* began with a paraphrase of Dr. Seuss: "I do like gambling, Sam-I-Am, I really like it, and I can. For I can do it in a plane, on a boat, at the track, and in the rain. I can do it in a casino, with the lottery, or with Keno."

A final consideration for op-ed pieces is that it must be *short* and *concise,* typically around 800 words. Although lengths of op-ed pieces in real newspapers vary--those in the *New York Times* may be longer than those in smaller papers, for example--you should waste no time in getting to your point.

Know your subject

Presumably, since you're writing an opinion piece, you will know something about your subject. However, that doesn't mean your readers know about it, so it is important to present your knowledge sufficiently to your readers.

The key is to understand your target audience: try to *think* like them, anticipate what they may not understand. For example, if you're arguing about tort reform in the legal system, and you're writing for a newspaper, your readers may not know what "tort" means.

By the same token, however, if your intended publication is a newsletter for lawyers, you would not need to define "tort"--your readers would know it is a wrongful act, injury or damage not covered by a contract for which lawyers can sue.

To define a term, the first place to begin is usually with a dictionary definition, but very often that is insufficient. Other ways of defining terms include *stipulation*, *negation* and *examples*.

Stipulation means you're asking readers to accept a definition that may differ from a more conventional one. When a writer says "national security is at an all-time low because of current immigration laws," the term *national security* is being used in a way that may differ from, say, a military general.

In recent years terms such as "family" and "family values" have been the target of much stipulation as writers and politicians offer their opinion on them. Sometimes, stipulations are used to make negative ideas seem more positive, as when a terrorist group uses the word *liberation* to describe its activities.

Negation is also sometimes useful in defining terms. By saying what something is *not*, readers may get a fuller picture of what something *is*.

Examples also provide a means of defining a term and are among the most useful means by which a writer can illuminate difficult subjects. *Justice* is a term that is difficult to define in abstract, but a writer who gives examples of what it means to him gives readers something concrete by which to evaluate his argument.

Supporting your argument

Regardless of who you're writing for, you need to explain your subject and support your argument in ways that are both informative and persuasive. This is especially true of technical or complex subjects, such as economics or science.

One way is to draw comparisons and analogies that the typical reader can relate to. It is no accident that politicians in Washington arguing for a balanced budget compare our nation's spending to a family's financial situation--something most people are familiar with.

Other ways to support your argument is to use voices of authority, such as experts and statistics, and to appeal to the needs and values of your readers.

Statistics, too, can and often are used in writing, but you should exercise the same reservations with them as with expert opinion. You should make sure they come from a reputable source, and you should let readers know the source.

Keep in mind that statistics can be skewed. If a glass is described as 25 percent empty, it is also 75 percent full. Statistics about gun-related deaths from the National Rifle Association may be skewed to favor the NRA's views on gun control.

Also, make sure pertinent terms are clearly defined. A few years ago, the number of farms in one state was reduced by several thousands by changing the definition of "farm" in the government agency that keeps track of such things.

Finally, don't over-rely on statistics. Too many numbers tend to convolute an argument. Whenever possible, you should use statistical information alongside appropriate comparisons or analogies that

vividly illustrate the relationships. An argument about the number of drunk driving fatalities, for example, could be compared to deaths resulting from other causes, such as cancer or heart disease.

Factual evidence from acknowledged authorities may suffice for a factual argument, but when making value or policy claims (see "Know your opinion"), you may require more. In such cases, it is essential to appeal to the readers' needs and values.

"Needs" are simply things important to your target audience. If your intended publication is the *Daily Mississippian*, for instance, you can assume that many of your readers will view financial aid, access to computers and libraries, and good study skills as important needs.

Values are the principles by which we judge right or wrong, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, worthwhile or undesirable. They have a profound effect on our behavior, so it is not surprising that appealing to values is a key element of argument.

Know your opinion

Finally, to write a good op-ed piece, it is crucial to know where you stand on your topic. While this may seem obvious, too often students write argumentative essays that waffle back and forth and end up arguing nothing in particular.

First, you should realize that it is an argumentative essay, intended to persuade readers to your point of view. You will offer a "claim" and then attempt to support that claim.

In general, there are three types of claims, each of which can be useful in argument:

- **Claims of fact** assert that a condition has existed, exists, or will exist and relies on factual information for support. In general, claims of fact are opinions drawn by inference.

- **Claims of value** make a judgment--they express approval or disapproval, attempting to prove that some action, belief or condition is right or wrong, good or bad, beautiful or ugly, worthwhile or undesirable.

  Regardless of what a value claim argues, often they may depend upon claims of fact as support. A value claim that democracy is superior to any other form of government, for instance, might require factual claims that define your terms and establish the standards by which you reach this conclusion.

- **Claims of policy** argue that certain conditions should exist. As the name suggests, they advocate adoption of policies or courses of action because problems have arisen that call for solution. The words *should* or *ought to* or *must* are almost always expressed or implied in the claim.

  As with value claims, claims of policy often require you to build upon fact and value claims. You may need to establish with a claim of fact that there is a problem needing a solution, for instance, and then use a claim of value to argue the rightness of solving the problem.