



WEIGH IN ON IMPORTANT ISSUES: HOW TO WRITE AND PITCH AN EFFECTIVE OP-ED

www.aaiusa.org

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OP-ED Placement Strategy

Arab Americans' issues are America's issues — health care, the economy, education. But increasingly, America's issues are those that most poignantly, most personally, and most profoundly impact Arab Americans — from national security to immigration, civil liberties and foreign policy.

For these reasons, it is more important than ever that our voice be heard and there are few outlets as effective as the media, and few places that can make our voice part of the American narrative as effectively as the Op-Ed pages of your local newspaper. Whether your daily is *The New York Times* or *The Hartford Courant*, your editorial can impact the policy dialogs in your community and across the nation.

AAI has several media tools available to facilitate press outreach. If you are interested in moving forward with an Op-Ed or need help pitching an idea to press in your area, we would like to help. Please contact Omar Tewfik at otewfik@aaiusa.org or 202 429-9210 for assistance.

Market Your Op-Ed

The Pitch: Your pitch is just as important as writing a great Op-Ed. Know who you are pitching your idea to and give them a reason to consider your story.

- Research the paper's coverage or lack thereof on the topic of your Op-Ed. Whether you are supporting or contesting your paper's stance on an issue, your Op-Ed needs to offer a fresh perspective or argument.
- Referencing your research on the paper's coverage of your topic, explain why your argument provides a unique perspective. Don't be afraid to cite a specific editorial author or article and express your agreement or disagreement with their perspective.

Writing the Op-Ed

Getting Started: *Explain the issue, who you are and why you are writing*

“As a(n) Arab American and a [member of the Chamber of Commerce, medical professional, frequent traveler, etc.], I have been closely following the [issue]. “

Raise the Issue: *Why is the issue you are writing about important?*

“The issue is not merely about [focal point], but also touches on (ex:)”

- Freedom of religion/ religious tolerance
- Civil liberties
- National security
- Hate crimes
- Anti-Muslim backlash
- American values
- American identity
- Role of politics and governance

Make the Issue Stick: *Call out your Member of Congress and explain why his/her statement and viewpoint is wrong or right. Feel free to touch on any of the following you believe are pertinent.*

“The debate has received a tremendous amount of media coverage and many have weighed in, including my [member of Congress] who said...[insert provided quote or statement]”

Point out the importance of debate and/or action on this issue, e.g., because it is:

- Exploiting a political wedge issue
- Playing ‘cheap politics’ for political gain
- Counter to constitutional rights
- Marginalizing an ethnic or religious community.
- Contrary to the nation’s fundamental values of tolerance and freedom.
- Illustrative of the need to pay attention to constituent issues, not problems concerning other districts or states.
- Consistent or inconsistent with polling on this issue.

Create an Action: *End with a call to action and a way to resolve the situation*

- Demand that your member of Congress reexamine his/her position and issue a follow-up statement; or thank your member of Congress for speaking out on the right side of the issue.
- Mention community campaigns to resolve the issue, or calls for action or statements regarding the controversy.



JOIN THE POLICY DISCUSSION: HOW TO LEVERAGE MEDIA AND ENGAGE POLICYMAKERS

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An effective advocate must use every available resource. The following are simple guidelines on how to successfully leverage the media and engage policymakers so that our message is heard.

This is a time when Arab Americans can make real progress on the issues that matter most. The [AAI website](http://www.aaiusa.org) has a wealth of resources regarding our domestic and foreign policy priorities including, immigration reform, civil liberties and post-9/11 national origin discrimination, as well as a multitude of Middle East-related issues. Plug into AAI's efforts, help shape the issue conversation and move our policy objectives forward.

Moving Our Agenda Forward, Together

Our ability to fully address the myriad issues facing our country is related to your ability to mobilize on those very issues. Whether it is reaching out to your member of Congress or a local paper, local constituents bring a national issue home. Working together, we can advance our policy agenda more effectively.

How AAI Takes Action	How You Can Take Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Maintain contact and arrange meetings with members of Congress and congressional staff for AAI members	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Schedule a meeting with your members of Congress in their district offices
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Send statements and letters to members of Congress in support/opposition to policy position or legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Remember that regular contact with congressional staff is as important—and can sometimes be more useful—than sporadic contact with the member

How AAI Takes Action	How You Can Take Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write formal thank you letters to members of Congress who co-sponsor constructive resolutions and letters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notify district office staff when you support/oppose an issue or policy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange meetings/conference calls with Administration officials and congressional offices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call or email in-district and D.C. congressional offices to thank members of Congress who take positive action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Host Capitol Hill briefings for members of Congress and congressional staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask your members of Congress and congressional staff to attend AAI briefings and events on Capitol Hill
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with Capitol Hill offices to organize a letter from the House or Senate to the Administration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize town hall forums on your issues of concern
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner with other issue/ethnic advocacy organizations to advocate policy or co-host events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner with local organizations and community leaders—attend meetings and host events
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Circulate an open letter to the President, member of Congress or Administration official 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite your members of Congress and staff to local events and community meetings

Engaging the Media: Choosing a Publication

Think of media outlets as stores, and of your issue as a product. We all know that getting our product in Target (i.e., *The New York Times*) will almost guarantee its success. The problem is that everyone wants to get into Target. Getting it on the shelf of a small mom-and-pop store (i.e., blogs or your community paper) is easier, and if enough of the product is sold in these small outlets, Target might pick it up.

The same holds true for news outlets. If you pitch a story to the *Times*, the chances of being published are slim. But if you pitch it to your local community paper, your chances are much higher.

There is also a practical advantage to being published in local outlets: you can leverage those articles to pitch a larger story to a bigger name, forwarding the published article to reporters with a note that says, “As you might have read in the...”. Media generates media.

Blogging and Social Networking

Taking the conversation online is a powerful way to further the dialogue and reach a wider audience. As you consider where to pitch your story, think about the blogs you read regularly and do some research. These days, just about everyone is writing online, so be sure to get into the mix.

News outlets are constrained by the limitations of time and space. But their online outlets have infinite time and space, and you will often find that media outlets will give your issue a spot online (e.g., *The Washington Post* online). This also gives you more space for an in-depth letter or article, photo, or video. Remember to link the article to your Facebook page, tweet feed, and send it via e-mail to other reporters, etc.

If you maintain your own web presence, consider using the content you publish on your own site to push an issue into the spotlight. Link and comment on similar blogs, ask to be a guest writer on another website, and network.

Because people are more attracted to multimedia visuals than to static text, videos are a powerful tool. Consider making one to post on YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook, etc.

Personal Letters

There are many opportunities for Arab Americans to engage the media. Writing a private letter to a reporter/editor pointing out a misconception, offering your opinion on an issue can be most effective. It helps build a relationship with the journalist that will afford you greater influence in the publication’s coverage. Remember to be persistent, consistent, and accurate.

Try sending an e-mail first. Wait at least 48 hours before sending a polite inquiry, e.g.:

*FOLLOWING UP: Immigration Reform from an Arab American POV
I wondered if you had a chance to read my e-mail of October 3—I’ve copied it again below. Looking forward to hearing from you soon.*

Remember to include a standard signature line with your name, title, and additional contact information.

Other useful points:

- Be polite and respectful
- Spell out the issue and back up your opinion with facts, examples, or verifiable sources
- Be concise—write no more than three paragraphs
- State your expertise up-front to ensure that your letter gets a closer read
- Know the reporter's beat, and reference a recent article that the reporter has written on the topic you wish to discuss.

Editorial Board Meetings

Meeting with Editorial Board members puts a face on the issue and establishes personal contact with key players at the media outlet. To set up an editorial board meeting (EBM), call the newspaper and ask for the individual in charge of scheduling these meetings. You will want to give them 2-4 weeks' advance notice. Be mindful of the news cycle, and try to time your visits accordingly. During big events like elections, your requests might not be honored simply due to lack of time, space and relevance.

At larger papers, you will want to meet with the correspondent or reporter focused on the issue you want to discuss. For your local or community paper, the entire editorial board may attend the meeting.

Prior to the meeting:

- Decide whether you will bring other speakers, how many, in what order they will speak, and what point(s) they will cover. A mix of experts and laypersons could increase the likelihood of getting your issue addressed.
- Find out how much time is scheduled for the meeting, and how many people will be attending.
- Gather all relevant information and supporting documents. You may want to assemble a folder to hand out at the presentation. Remember to include contact information for the speakers and allow enough time for questions.

After the Meeting:

- Thank the editors and reporters for their time.
- Send an e-mail a few days later thanking them again for their time.

Remember that the meeting doesn't guarantee that the Board will publish an editorial on supporting your point. They could publish an editorial opposing your position, publish a news story based on your visit, or not address your issue at all. Regardless of the outcome, it is an important step toward building a relationship with your local editors and reporters.

Letters to the Editor

Remember that your audience is not the Editor, but the public. A Letter to the Editor is usually in response to a recently published article—as a rule of thumb, you have seven days to respond to an article. The more prompt your response, the greater the likelihood of being published.

The best letters are short and address a single point. If you have more than one concern with an article, try to focus on the most important one.

The first sentence of your letter should state the article to which you are responding, the date it ran, and quote the issue you are either agreeing with or disputing. Then state your opinion, and include facts, data, examples, etc., that would interest both the Editorial Board and the public. A Letter to the Editor in papers with larger circulations should not exceed 150 words, and should not exceed 200 words for any publication. This doesn't leave you much room to argue the greater issues. Think of your letter as either reinforcing a point you feel wasn't given much attention, or correcting a fact. Larger issues should be addressed in an op-ed.

Finally close with your name, address, phone number, and e-mail. It is important that letters offer no analysis or conclusion.

Op-eds

The editorial page is traditionally reserved for the opinions of the outlet's editors, Editorial Board, or publisher. Op-eds, written by a columnist or guest writer, appear on the page opposite a newspaper's editorial page—thus the name: Op(posite the) Ed(itorial). This forum gives a guest writer the largest platform for rebutting a stance.

Below are a few guidelines to help you get your op-ed published:

- **Timeliness and newsworthiness**—pegging your op-ed to a hot news item gives an op-ed editor incentive to publish the article.
- **Grab your readers**—you have 3-4 sentences to grab your reader's attention. The first paragraph should be short and compelling.
- **Be clear and concise**—op-ed writing is an art. You have limited space (600-800 words) to get a point across. Use small words and verbs, write in the active voice, avoid slang, clichés, academic language, and overused expressions.

- **Strength of argument (supporting facts)**—choose the top three arguments to support your thesis and use reliable sources to support your argument. If you are challenging a fact, footnote your source(s).
- **Ingenuity and humor**—find an interesting or unique angle to your position. An editor ultimately wants to please his readers and, as John Stewart proves, humor keeps people’s attention.
- **Use personal experiences and the first-person** —using a personal story adds to the originality of the piece. As long as it explains or supports your point and is not superfluous, it will set your op-ed apart.
- **The Closer**—as with any good sales pitch, the closing paragraph should be as strong as the opening and should drive the point home. This will leave a lasting impression.

For more information or to keep us updated on your efforts, please contact [Omar Tewfik](#) at 202-429-9210.