

Key Elements of An Effective Editorial

The following are the elements discussed in class that comprise an effective editorial. The full article in which these elements are defined follow.

- 1. Focused central theme**
- 2. Competing alternate view(s) refuted**
- 3. Arguments are inductive**
- 4. Moral Evaluations are fact based**
- 5. Relies on reader's implicit knowledge and values**
- 6. Clarity of prose**
- 7. Calls reader to action**
- 8. Careful and exhaustive editing evident**

Writing a Convincing Editorial

By Robert W. Tracinski

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The following guidelines will help you to write more convincing editorials. These principles apply to all writing--but they also involve problems that are unique to this format.

1. Focus on a central theme.

The single greatest error made by beginning writers is that they try to say too much. This error comes from the belief that, in order to be convincing, an argument must be utterly comprehensive, addressing every possible issue that relates to it. But no argument is effective unless it can be absorbed and remembered by the reader. An effective editorial must be essentialized, focusing only on the most important issues and integrating them into one graspable whole.

In writing an editorial on the global warming crusade, for example, there are at least a dozen separate points that might be relevant to the issue. One could discuss: the various scientific arguments against claims of global warming; the nature of the alleged scientific consensus on global warming; the effect on human life of restricting fossil fuels; the environmentalists' past record of promoting bogus doomsday claims; the admissions by some prominent environmentalists of their willingness to sacrifice factual accuracy to promote their agenda; the role of government funding of science; the meaning of the "red to green" switch from the pro-industrial Old Left to the anti-industrial New Left; the benefits to human life of the industrial revolution; the environmentalist attacks on nuclear power, which is the only real alternative to fossil fuels; the environmentalists' belief in the intrinsic value of nature; the connection between environmentalism and religion; the connection between environmentalism and altruism. And so on.

To present all of these points in one article would overwhelm the reader. Remember also that a typical newspaper editorial is between 700 and 800 words--at the longest, up to 1,100 words. To present all of the possible issues in such a short space, one would have to condense each point into a few cryptic assertions.

To essentialize the material, it is necessary to organize it around one central message or theme. Which theme you choose depends, to some extent, on your knowledge and on your readers' context. In our example, the candidates for a theme would include: "global warming claims are refuted by the scientific facts"; "there is no real scientific consensus on global warming," "the global-warming campaign is a product of the politicization of science"; "limits on fossil fuels would cause massive damage to human life"; "global-warming campaigners are motivated by hatred of industry rather than concern for human life."

You have to decide which of these potential themes is the most important. The theme, "there is no real scientific consensus on global warming", for example, does not address the most fundamental issue involved. First, it is primarily a matter of reporting--e.g., naming some of the scientists who reject the alleged consensus--rather than analysis. Second, it does not prove much; the truth is determined by the facts, not by consensus. Another theme, "global-warming campaigners are motivated by hatred of industry rather than concern for human life," should be rejected because it is too difficult to prove in a short article covering a single subject. It would be easier to demonstrate in a longer article that discusses several different environmentalist crusades.

The theme you choose determines which points you include, how you cover them and what you leave out. For example, if you choose the theme "the global-warming campaign is a product of the politicization of science," you would focus most on the political machinations behind the alleged consensus; you would also have to include something about the role of government funding, and (perhaps) the past record of other environmentalist hysterias. You would certainly discuss the scientific arguments against global warming, but the scientific arguments would be subordinate points, included only to indicate that something other than science must be driving the global-warming campaign. Finally, certain other issues would be dropped: The left's switch from "red" to "green," for example, is too tangential.

Having a clear grasp of your central theme allows you to organize and integrate the article, making it more comprehensible to the reader. You do not need to name the theme explicitly in the article, but it is important to name it to yourself.

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2. Know the viewpoint you have to refute.

Although your emphasis should always be on the positive point you are trying to convey, every editorial is also trying to answer or refute a commonly held position. In fact, you are usually trying to answer two positions: the liberal and the conservative, or the subjectivist and the intrinsicist, or some other false alternative. It is important to understand what those positions are, so that you can provide the evidence that will be most convincing to your audience.

For example, on global warming, you can expect that the average person accepts the scientific claims of the environmentalists. More important, though, he believes these claims to be the impartial product of an objective scientific process. To present a convincing argument, therefore, you have to present evidence that will lead him to question the process by which environmentalist claims have come to be viewed as "settled science." This would lead you to select, as your central theme: "the global-warming campaign is a product of the politicization of science." Why is this so important? If you choose only to address the specific scientific arguments against global warming, you will face the following objection: "How can all of the scientists who say global warming is a fact be wrong? Can't we trust the integrity of scientists? And doesn't your skepticism about global warming put you in the same camp as the alternative-medicine types who are hostile to science?" The only way to answer this is to argue not just that the environmentalists are wrong on the facts, but that they are actively rejecting an objective scientific approach.

The basic principle is that, to convince your reader, you must provide him with the information that he needs, to correct his existing errors.

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3. Make inductive arguments.

An all-too-common writing error--an especially seductive one for those who value reason and logic--is a reliance on deductive arguments. A deductive argument is one that derives a specific conclusion from abstract principles--principles which are already accepted as proved. A deductive argument starts with abstractions and reasons toward concretes. An inductive argument, by contrast, is one in which an abstract conclusion is established by reference to a range of concrete facts. An inductive argument starts with concretes and reasons toward abstractions.

The weakness of a deductive argument is that it assumes the reader already accepts your abstract principles. Even worse, it assumes that the reader understands your basic principles in the same way that you do. Consider, for example, a deductive argument against affirmative action. Such an argument might proceed along the following lines: "Racism, we know, is evil. Racism is defined as judging people and dispensing rewards and punishment on the basis of race rather than individual merit. But affirmative action is just such a policy of racial preferences. Therefore, affirmative action is evil." The problem is that some readers will say: "I don't agree with your definition of racism. I think racism means the oppression of blacks by a white majority. After all, blacks aren't a majority and don't control the government. How, then, can they be racists?" Or another person might reply: "You are oversimplifying. If someone has been injured by racial prejudice in the past, isn't it right to repair the wrong by giving him preferential treatment now? Isn't this required out of justice to the victims of racism?" A deductive argument does not answer these objections because it does not address a whole range of concrete facts. It rests its entire validity on the reader's agreement with a single definition.

To build an inductive argument, you would have to make observations of the following type. First, you might point out that affirmative action often injures non-racist whites or even Asians, none of whom are responsible for past wrongs, while its beneficiaries are not required to prove

that they have suffered from racism. A poor white with a good record might lose out to a middle-class black with a weaker record. From this, you can conclude that the program is not concerned with individual justice. Second, you might point to the increased racial divisions caused by affirmative action. Look, for example, to the fighting over President Clinton's recent "Race Commission"; members of various minorities clashed over how much representation each group had on the Commission, with Asians, Hispanics, and American Indians complaining that the panel was dominated by blacks. From this and other examples, you can conclude that when the government hands out racial favors, it splits people into warring racial factions, each fighting for its share of the favors. Finally, you could cite examples of how affirmative action rewards the less competent at the expense of the more competent. You can point to the fire department that was forced to hire more women, even though they couldn't lift the heavy equipment needed in emergencies. Or you could point to the elite universities which admit less-qualified minority students, who then fail, putting pressure on the university to lower its academic standards. You can then conclude that affirmative action, rather than helping its supposed beneficiaries to achieve, really has the effect of undermining objective standards of achievement. From these types of observations, you can finally draw your broadest conclusion: that affirmative action promotes racial group warfare over individual justice and should be opposed.

Presenting an inductive argument does not mean that you always state the facts first and your conclusions second. It may be perfectly acceptable--and often more dramatic--to start an article by asserting an abstract conclusion, e.g.: "Affirmative action is an insidious attempt to perpetuate racism." What an inductive argument requires is that you provide the concrete examples and show how they lead to your conclusion.

Making an inductive argument based on concrete examples puts your broad, abstract conclusions on a solid foundation. You have to be selective; you cannot give every fact on which your conclusion is based, because that would include the whole sum of your concrete knowledge. The reader has to provide that complete range of facts for himself, based on his own observations. But by grounding your arguments in well-selected concrete examples, you can indicate to the reader the basic steps that validate your conclusion.

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4. Base moral evaluations on the facts.

This is an extension of the point about induction. Just as factual statements must be based on induction, so moral invectives must be justified by factual arguments. Otherwise, such invective will be interpreted, understandably, as name-calling and dogmatic zealotry.

There is one simple rule for justifying a strong moral tone: Remember that there is no is-ought gap. If you can show that the global-warming scare is based on an assault on objective science, then you can call its proponents "dishonest." If you can show that affirmative action punishes the competent for no other reason than the color of their skin, then you are entitled to call the program "vicious." If you can indicate the facts that make a given person or action evil, then you are entitled to your epithets.

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5. Rely on the reader's implicit knowledge and values.

The flip side of the need for induction and for fact-based moral judgments is that you do not have to validate everything from the ground up. If you did, even the simplest argument would require a lengthy essay. There are certain ideas and values that you can take for granted--if they are widely accepted and if they are not fundamentally at issue in the debate.

In today's context, unfortunately, you cannot assume your reader will agree that industrial civilization is progress. But you can assume he will acknowledge that living to the age of 70 is better than dying at 35. There is no need to argue the point. After all, if someone openly declares that dying is good, what can you say to him? Similarly, you can assume that on some level your reader values reason and knows that he has to accept the facts. Once again, if he doesn't, what can you say to him? No argument you offer can do any good if he places his wishes above reality.

Generally, you can rely on basic Aristotelian epistemology (e.g., "facts are facts and cannot be wished away") and basic Western values: individual judgment vs. conformity; individual happiness vs. total self-abnegation; work vs. parasitism; freedom vs. total state control. You can also rely on more concrete conclusions that have been thoroughly demonstrated by historical fact, such as: socialism is an economic failure; Communism was an evil totalitarian ideology; the Dark Ages are an example of an era ruled by religion; the Nazis were bad guys. By reading the newspapers and conversing with the people you meet every day, you can get a good feel for what implicit ideas and values you can rely on.

The importance of this point is that you do not have to validate the whole of the Objectivist philosophy--all the way down to meta-ethics and concept-formation--in order to establish your point. So long as you can appeal to these basic, implicitly accepted facts and values, you have sufficiently demonstrated your point.

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6. It is more important to be clear than to be eloquent.

Most beginning writers feel that it is important for them to attempt a colorful, engaging, or eloquent writing style. This attitude can create two problems. First, it paralyzes your mind. Instead of giving yourself the simple instruction "come up with an example of a negative effect of affirmative action," you give yourself the impossible instruction "come up with a ringing phrase that will impress my audience." Second, this approach tends to produce writing that sounds brilliant or witty on a superficial level, but which doesn't deliver a clear message. A standing example of this problem is provided by conservative college newspapers; in my experience, these papers habitually rely on ridicule of the left's gaudier absurdities (which is not difficult) in place of substantive arguments.

The primary goal of one's writing is to be clear: to convey one's conclusion and the evidence for it in a manner that the reader can easily understand. Eloquent phrases, vivid images, and humorous examples are only valuable if they advance that goal. For example, in response to a proposal for a new law against "hate crimes" you might use sarcastic humor to highlight the absurdity of the name. "Hate crimes--as opposed to what? All the robberies and murders committed out of benevolence and good will toward the victim?" But you would have to use this comment to highlight a serious issue--in this case, the fact that the hate crimes law would punish criminals, not for their hatred, but for their ideas.

In time, you will develop a more eloquent and engaging style as you get more practice at writing clearly. In the meantime, however, a prosaic editorial that persuades the reader is better than a colorful collection of "sound bites" that add up to nothing.

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7. End on a call to action.

The purpose of an editorial is not merely to inform the reader but to motivate him to take action. That action may range from rejecting a widespread idea, to changing his lifestyle, to opposing new legislation or voting for a presidential candidate. But always bear in mind that editorials are not a forum for mere abstract, academic observations. You are offering practical guidance. You are advising the reader to oppose restrictions on fossil fuels, to speak out against affirmative action, or to call his congressman to register his disapproval of a proposed law.

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8. Good writing comes from exhaustive editing.

The writing instruction--or lack of it--given in today's schools leads many people to think that writing is a stream-of-consciousness process, in which one waits for "inspiration" and, when it comes, passively transcribes the product onto paper. In reality, the process of writing consists of the methodical examination and re-examination of ideas. Just as you can't expect to come up with a right answer to every problem off the top of your head, so you can't expect your first draft to be brilliant. In fact, most first drafts are pretty bad.

By and large, good writing is created through exhaustive editing. Editing consists of asking a whole range of questions pertaining to every aspect of the article. On the highest level, this includes: Is my theme the best one, or am I ignoring a more fundamental issue? On the lower level: Is the second point of my argument necessary to demonstrate my theme, or does it divert the reader's attention onto a tangent? And on the lowest level: Is the grammar of this sentence too complicated? Is this the right word, or is there another one that captures my meaning more exactly?

These questions are the process by which you create the final, finished product. When you have completed that process, you will have achieved an inestimable value: You will know that you have produced, not a hodge-podge of whatever ideas came off the top of your head, but a carefully crafted argument that is logically structured, clearly expressed, and convincing to your readers.