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## UNIT 6 OPINION WRITING

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## 6.0 INTRODUCTION

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Opinion writing is fast gaining currency and acceptance as a form of media writing. By its very name the term opinion writing suggests that the expression of such views by the writers are personal and subjective on a topic that is of considerable interest to media audiences. Contrary to other heads under which media writing is done like – news stories, news features, interviews, editorials and even interpretative or investigative reporting, opinion writing makes no claims to objectivity. Readers look forward to the know the opinion or views of certain person(s), whether it may be a journalist or non-journalist, on a particular subject of interest to them and not necessarily to know the truth or facts.

Opinion writing is a unique form of mass media because even before the communication starts, the recipients have an idea of the message they will get. This cannot be said of any other form of message in media communication.

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## 6.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

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After going through this Unit, the students will come to know about

- opinion writing and its importance;
- how opinion writing is different from other form of media writing such as news stories, features, editorials, interviews and research based write-ups;
- all those who can do opinion writing;
- the special features of opinion writing;
- what the readers expect in an opinion piece;
- how to market your opinion pieces.

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## 6.2 DEFINITION

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In opinion writing, the writer expresses his/ her opinion on a particular current issue or topic. Though there is no claim of it being objective or balanced, good opinion writers choose appropriate evidence to support and substantiate the opinion expressed. This may be in the form of research based data, opinion expressed by other experts on the subject or through citations and references for further reading.

An opinion writing piece basically contains viewpoint of a person, journalist or non-journalist subject expert on a topic of considerable readership interest. The topic has to be related to some current development that is the theme of public discourse. The subject should be of wide interest to arouse curiosity among people who want to know more about it.

### 6.2.1 Important Components of an Opinion Writing Piece

A good opinion piece should have the following attributes:

- a good catchy headline to attract the audiences of print, broadcast or social media alike;

- a topic of current interest to the audience or we may say a topic, that is of general discussion among people;
- thematic unity which can cater to the satisfaction of the audience; and
- a rational and well-arranged case presented in an analytical form of writing.

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### **6.3 DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OPINION WRITING AND OTHER FORMS OF JOURNALISTIC EXPRESSION**

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The traditional way of categorization of contents of newspaper is to segregate all non-advertising matter into two heads news and views. It has been said with great conviction that while news is sacred views can be personal. This was the dictum of British press of the Victorian era on which newspapers in India tailored their contents for more than a century from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

However, as the U.S. influence on Indian intelligentsia grew, especially after the information and communications technology (ICT) revolution and globalization, lobby journalism and advocacy journalism started gaining respectability in India. This was the origin and source of opinion writing in Indian media. It is, however, now fast emerging as a distinct format of media expression termed as opinion journalism.

Opinion writing is different from other forms of media writing in several ways and this is what you need to understand. Now let us see how it differs from the other forms of journalistic expression.

#### **6.3.1 Editorial Writing and Opinion Writing**

Editorials, as leaders are generally called, denote broader philosophy of a newspaper or journal and its outlook on various socio-political and economic issues. Leaders, therefore, express the consensus of the entire editorial team as well as management of a media organization. Compared with this, an opinion piece is expression of an individual writer and his/her viewpoint. You must have many times come across journals and websites put out a disclaimer at the end of a piece that the views contained therein are the personal views of a writer and these may or may not be the views of the journal or website or news portal as the case may be.

Moreover, leaders are generally balanced and sober, which may not be the case with opinion writing. In a leader the editorial writer tries to take into consideration all sides of an issue and then argue in favor of their editorial line. An opinion writer has no such compulsions.

#### **6.3.2 Features and Opinion Writing**

Features can broadly be divided into two categories – news features and non-news features. Features can broadly be divided into two categories – news features and non-news features. Opinion writing can also be on something which is currently in news or something which is not making news. Like opinion writing, features also convey the views of a writer on a subject. Yet, features are different from opinion writing. The essential difference is in language, style and presentation. While good features have flowery, twisted and even idiomatic language, opinion

pieces are straight and bold. While features are meant for leisure reading in a relaxed mood, opinion pieces force you to commit yourself to a certain viewpoint. Features do not put any demand on you to change your media behavior, thinking, attitude and psyche by persuading and convincing you but opinion pieces try to convert you to the writer’s viewpoint.

### 6.3.3 Special Write-ups and Opinion Writing

Every good news media outlet invites subject specialists to write on complex and complicated issues which crop up in the public domain. These issues mostly pertain to defence, scientific research, health, environment, economic and fiscal policies which impact our lives.

However, most of us lack expertise to understand and analyse the implications of such issues. Special articles help us in developing our comprehension and to understand such complicated issues.

Special write-ups of course need handling of a topic or subject by a single person. However, these are different from a piece of opinion writing. The clear demarking line is that special articles contain the wide and accumulated knowledge of the writer much more than merely his/her opinion. While special write-up are rich in facts, figures and researched data and seek to appeal to the minds of readers, it is the opinion writings which appeal more to the hearts of the readers. The content of such pieces is many times sketchy but appeals to the emotions and sentiments of the readers.

### 6.3.4 Middles and Opinion Writing

Middles are small pieces meant for light reading containing humor and satire. These pieces are called middles as these are generally placed at the centre of the editorial page. The conventional wisdom tells us that middles are placed to provide comic relief to an otherwise heavy reading of the editorial page containing leaders, special articles by subject specialists and comments by senior writers.

Like opinion pieces middles are also an expression of an individual writer’s creativity. However middles do not have the conviction, sharpness and straight and sometimes aggressive approach of an opinion piece.

Barring some honorable exceptions like Busy Bee, middles are often read and forgotten and leave no image of the writer on a reader’s mind. As opposed to this an opinion piece defines its writer.

#### Check Your Progress 1

- Note:** 1) Use the space given below for your Answer.  
2) Compare your answer with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. What is opinion writing?

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2. What is the difference between opinion writing and leader (editorial) writing while both contain the viewpoint of those who write them?

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## 6.4 UNIVERSE OF OPINION WRITING

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An opinion piece can be on any subject or any area in which media readers are interested or can be made to take interest. However, opinion writing is generally done on some subject or topic that is current and in public domain. As you know any writing for media is done while keeping the readers in mind. That is why a journalist or subject expert writes an opinion piece with an eye on the number of readers who will be interested in the opinion piece written and published. Therefore, areas of common interest and general liking are the preferred areas of opinion writing.

It is often said that the present day journalism is focused on four Cs – crime, cinema, celebrities and cricket. A lot of opinion writing is being done in these areas. However, other areas like politics, economic affairs, international affairs and social issues which see a wide divergence of viewpoints, clash of interests and controversy do find a much higher place on the list of preferred areas of interest of opinion writers.

### 6.4.1 Issues of Politics and Ideology

India is a country which is home to people of different creeds, castes and communities who are represented in our system by different political parties, religions and cultural groups. These groups profess different ideologies and they often come into clash with each other.

The political and ideological differences of these groups influence opinion writing in a big way. The issues of political and differing ideologies offer a big scope for opinion writing.

### 6.4.2 Social Issues

Our society is, however, passing through a process of rapid social transformation. The social and personal relations are no more being governed by age old traditions. The changing face of society is being viewed from different angles by different people. The clash between tradition and modernization is a fertile area of study and research for our social scientist. This is also an interest area for media which is a mirror to society.

Social issues invoke different reactions from different people, including those who write for media. Issues like caste-based job reservations, woman empowerment, relief and welfare measures for disadvantaged sections of society also provide a big scope for opinion writing.

### 6.4.3 Issues of Public Policy

Since liberalization of our economy in the last decade of the twentieth century, the debate on public policy has been revolving around the theme of development and

improvement in the living standards of the masses. Since this is a major challenge comprising many aspects of public policy, there is a big debate in the country on what is the right package to reach out economic justice to the people who need it most. The debate is complex as it is multi-dimensional. A lot many aspects of this on-going debate provide good themes and sub-themes for opinion writing.

#### **6.4.4 Issues of Culture and Education**

The debate on culture which had been on the back burner because of our preoccupation with economic development in the years since independence in 1947 and it has surfaced in the recent past. The issue of culture invites contradictory and even conflicting viewpoints and there is a marked divergence of opinion on the subject. For opinion writing, culture is a rich and fertile ground. Along with culture education also finds a place in the universe of opinion writing.

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### **6.5 CHARACTERISTICS OF AN OPINION PIECE**

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Opinion writing in media, both news media as well as non-news media, should have the following characteristics:

#### **6.5.1 Timeliness**

The topic chosen and ideas expressed should correspond to the need and requirement of the time. The right time for media writing, as you know will be based on the interest of the audience and their desire to know more on a subject that is currently occupying their interest.

Initiated by the broadcast media and then followed by the social media the need for timeliness of opinion pieces has become even more pronounced. Now audiences want to know about various aspects of a development or happening as quickly as possible. As legendary editor R. Madhvan Nair used to say “anyone writing for media must have the capacity for quick reaction.”

#### **6.5.2 Subject Knowledge, Expertise**

The wider your knowledge of men and matters, the more successful you will be as an opinion writer. You can acquire such knowledge mostly by reading and looking out for reading materials on the subject of your interest from all possible sources. Only reading will give you new angles on the issues on which you want to do opinion writing.

In an era of information explosion media audiences are much better informed than the audiences of pre-internet generation. Therefore, present day audiences want to have the content that gives them an insight into the subject of their liking. Therefore, only such opinion pieces find audience approval which have been written by those with deep knowledge of the subject. This is the reason why more and more non-journalists are now writing columns in the journals. Media is also seeking reactions of experts on subjects about which editorial staff cannot speak with authority.

The subject knowledge of an opinion writer has to be based on an understanding of the background and historical interpretation of the topic on which the opinion piece is being written. While one need not give any historical evidence or trace background in an opinion piece, the writer’s knowledge of this must reflect in his piece.

### 6.5.3 Clarity of Viewpoint

An opinion piece, unlike an editorial or even a feature, has no compulsion to cover all aspects of the subject. The opinion writer should have clarity of mind and a well-defined view on the topic. Media readers appreciate straight and forthright approach of an opinion piece as it helps them in making up their minds.

### 6.5.4 Unique/ Uncommon Opinion

By instinct, media audiences always look for something new and unique in the content offered to them. Hackneyed style and conventional approach, howsoever well it may be presented, never finds favor with readers, especially among the young and aspiring. Therefore, a good opinion piece must present a unique and uncommon view before the readers.

### 6.5.5 Keep Audience in Mind

Unlike other formats of writing, opinion writing is a highly personalized and subjective style of writing. While all other writing is done with the view in mind that the reader is the king (on the pattern of the marketing slogan that consumer is the king), an opinion writer does not believe in the dictum that is the reader is the king. The opinion writer rather tries to impose his viewpoint on the audience and expects the audience to follow him. Many a times the audience does follow.

However, a column writer has to keep in mind all the intellectual and emotional dimensions of the audiences. He has to have a very good idea of the audience psyche and should know the limits up to which audience will walk with him. One prerequisite of this is that besides being straight and forthright, the opinion writer should keep his piece simple and sweet. Complex and involved writing will chase away the readers.

### 6.5.6 Avoid Conflicts

To put across the viewpoint in a straight forward manner is all right for an opinion writer. But he/she should avoid clash with those holding opposing viewpoints. The guiding philosophy of column writing should be rational and logical presentation of a definite viewpoint and not a running down of the opposing viewpoint. A sharp, aggressive and attacking posture does not earn lasting respect for an opinion writer.

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## 6.6 HOW TO PLAN AN OPINION PIECE

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While writing an opinion piece may appear simple, but it is not. You have to make good preparations for writing a piece that will sell. Your piece must impress and attract the readers for whom it is written.

### 6.6.1 Think of a Topic

You have to think of a topic which is a topical and you have the core knowledge to handle it. Your mere interest in a topic should not be the sole reason for writing an opinion piece.

You should not start writing before you know what you are aiming at. Otherwise, you will confuse yourself and your readers who will not know what they are supposed to do with your writing. Think hard before deciding on the topic.

## 6.6.2 Assess the Eco-system

You have to look to the media environment if you want to successfully market your opinion piece. If you write on the democratic ethos of Holi festival when Diwali is approaching or about the significance of Good Friday when New Year celebrations are about to start nobody will bother to read your piece. Elections in general, IPL or World Cup Cricket or death of a big and popular leader or a major terrorist attack are highly preoccupying events and most of the readers do not want to read anything other than what relates to these events.

In the year 2009, the death of Prime Minister V.P. Singh almost got blacked out from media because of the dastardly terrorist attack in Mumbai which shocked the world and claimed close to 200 lives. V.P. Singh was a highly controversial political leader and but for the terrorist attack his death would have found very good coverage in the media.

While sudden and unexpected developments like terrorist attack or a natural calamity cannot be anticipated, an opinion writer can certainly take care to avoid a clash with something that can be foreseen to time his/her opinion piece.

## 6.6.3 Collect Material

All good media or non-media writing requires a good study and research by the writer. Opinion writing needs it more as an opinion writer has to take firm and formidable line in support of his/her viewpoint. A good opinion piece, therefore, requires good preparation which can be possible only by reading good literature on the topic. Therefore, collecting good material on the topic is a necessary pre requisite for opinion writing.

## 6.6.4 Draw an Outline/Define Parameters

To be effective no opinion piece should focus on more than one aspect of a subject. If you are expressing your views on a certain scheme designed for the benefit of small and landless farmers you should not discuss hybrid varieties of seeds and the status of canal irrigation. Before writing you have to set your limits. You must decide what points are to be included in the piece and how it has to move in a direction desired by you.

## 6.6.5 Think of the Market

Most people will be interested in a piece, even though not very well written, if it is written on what has now come to be known as four “C” – crime, cricket, cinema and celebrity. However, to pick up a topic belonging to this broad area you must look at it well in order to discover a so far untouched area or angle that will impress your readers.

Some newspapers or journals have what is called human angle others have literary angle but all have news angle or the topical touch as we may call it. Keep this in mind while looking to market your product.

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## 6.7 HOW TO WRITE AN OPINION PIECE

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Having done proper planning you have to keep the following points in mind while writing in opinion piece.



### 6.7.1 Importance of intro

Introduction or intro as it is called in newsroom is to a write-up what face is to human body. It is the first introduction of what you are.

You should remember a good opening paragraph wins half the battle. The life of your piece is in the opening paragraph. If it is sharp in focus and opening in nature it makes an instant impact on the mind of the editor. Otherwise, it leaves no impression. Let us also remember most editors do not read a piece beyond the first two paragraphs before deciding to use it in their journal or return it with regards.

### 6.7.2 Catchy Headlines

Opinion writers are usually not expected to give headlines to the pieces they write as it is the job of the editors who finally clear a piece for publishing. However, headline given by an opinion writer on his/her piece can help editors understand the mind and thrust of the writer. Since a headline is a very brief summary and indicator of what all a writer wants to convey and has tried to convey, it is easy for those whose job it is to assess the news value of the opinion piece and to take a decision.

Writing a headline brings out the best in you as a creative writer. That is why good headlines are often remembered long after the newspaper/journal is forgotten. Headlines are important because a good headline is like a pretty face which instantly attracts you.

### 6.7.3 The Structure of an Opinion Piece

When we build a house, we first ask an architect to visualize and draw a blueprint and only then allow the mason to touch the building materials. Similarly before taking a pen and paper or opening your laptop, you have to think of all the pieces you have and in what order. It will be better if you write it point-wise.

Intro is of course important but then you have to move quickly to the main body, add descriptive details and then go on to the concluding paragraph. What is important is that you set a word limit and divide it into four basic components of your write-up-intro, body (in which you spell out your main idea in detail), description (where you elaborate on what you have been trying to convey) and finally the conclusion.

Besides this, also please take care of the format. You should have short paragraphs (no paragraph should have more than two or a maximum of three sentences) and the sentences should be short and straight.

### 6.7.4 Language and Style

The language of a piece should be simple plain and straight. It should not be a burden on the reader's mind. Just compare the two descriptions of a scene first: A tall, narrow-chested, middle-aged man, with graying beard, sat on the green grass trampled down by pedestrians; he sat down quietly, timidly, nervously looking around.

Second: a middle-aged man was sitting on the grass in a public lawn.

The language should be comfortable in tone and non-aggressive in temper. It should never make the reader uneasy or anxious. It is not good if your language has undertones of alarm, irritation and confrontation.

You should write well so that you can connect yourself with the readers, open up their minds and achieve your aim. Language creates a strong impression, good or bad, and exposes the personality of the writer.

**Bryon A Garner**, author of the best-selling reference work  *Garner's Modern American Usage*, says that to express yourself clearly you need to:

- understand that your readers have no time to waste. Therefore, get to the point quickly and clearly.
- use a tone appropriate to your audience (readers).
- emphasize the point most important to your readers. If they feel your message is relevant to them they will read and respond.
- choose an intelligent, non-specialist person among your readers and think that you are writing for that person. Your message will be more appealing and persuasive.

### 6.7.5 Choice of Words

Words in a sentence or paragraph are like pearls in a necklace. A necklace looks attractive only when all pearls shine. Even one bad pearl compromises the quality of a necklace. Similarly, while writing an opinion piece be careful about every word that you use.

H.W. Flower in his book, *The Kings English*, has laid down some rules for the choice of right words while writing. These are:

1. prefer the familiar word to the far-fetched.
2. prefer the concrete word to the abstract.
3. prefer the single word to the circumlocution.
4. prefer the short word to the long.

### 6.7.6 Editing

Once you have written your piece, you have to do two things – first revise it and then edit it. Revising should be done to ensure that your editorial is giving the message, which you wanted to give to your readers. You can still think of a change in the basic argument put forth by you if you think it is needed.

While revising the draft of your editorial you have to ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I been utterly truthful?
- Have I said all that I needed to say?
- Have I been appropriate, diplomatic and fair?
- Do I have three parts to the piece—an opener, a middle, and a closing?

- In my opener, have I made my points quickly and clearly? And concretely?
- Have I avoided a slow wind-up that unnecessarily postpones the message?
- In the middle, have I proved my points with specifics?
- Is the structure immediately apparent to my readers? Have I used informative headings?
- Is my closing consistent with the rest, yet expressed freshly?
- Have I avoided unnecessary repetition?

Editing is needed to remove any mistakes of spelling or grammar and to time your language. But revision and editing should be done with a cool mind.

Editing is a different art but you need to be careful with your language. You need to check your draft on the following counts.

- Can I save some words here?
- Is there a better way of phrasing this idea?
- Is my meaning unmistakable?
- Is the expression relaxed but refined?
- Does one sentence glide into the next, without discontinuities?

### 6.7.7 Conclusion

The concluding paragraph of your opinion piece will have to leave your readers happy and satisfied. Therefore, you have to be very careful while writing the last paragraph of your opinion piece to ensure that the last paragraph is good and leaves a lasting impression on the mind of the readers. You have to examine the entire write-up like a judge. Be totally dispassionate while examining all aspects of your piece to ensure its quality. Judge it for language, facts and presentation before you hand it over to the editors for publication.

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## 6.8 SCOPE OF OPINION WRITING

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There is hardly a subject nowadays from astrology to nudism that does not have periodical journals devoted to them. A lot of journals, websites and news portals exists on a wide variety of subjects which are always in need of good editorial content. Those who run these smaller news units need content that promotes their chosen area of interest be it political, social or economic. Media organizations seeking to promote the interests of caste and community associations, regional aspirations, furthering interests of professional groups like teachers, lawyers, government servants, small business and NGOs always look for well informed editorial content to promote their case.

Such small news organizations have less resources to be able to employ editorial staff to generate content. They prefer freelancers for the job. And that is your opportunity. However, you will have to work hard to avail yourself of such opportunities. Hard-work involves locating such organizations, understanding their requirements, contacting their editors and then writing to meet their expectations. The challenge is formidable but then scope is also limitless.

### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** 1) Use the space given below for your Answer.

2) Compare your answer with those given at the end of this Unit.

1. What are the salient points to be kept in mind while writing a piece on opinion writing?

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2. What care should you take while writing a good opinion piece?

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3. What is the scope of marketing opinion writing in the present day world of journalism?

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### 6.9 LET US SUM UP

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In this Unit we have learnt as to what is an opinion piece and how it is different from other forms of media writing such as news stories – straight or interpretative, interviews, features, special articles, middles and editorials.

We have also learnt about the characteristics of a good opinion piece and how it is written. We also learnt as to where it can be marketed and who can be potential buyers.

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## 6.11 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

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### Check Your Progress 1

1. In opinion writing, the writer expresses his/ her opinion on a particular current issue or topic. The topic has to be related to some current development that is the theme of public discourse. The subject should be of wide interest and able to arouse curiosity among people who want to know more about it.
2. Editorials, as leaders generally denote broader philosophy of a newspaper or journal and its outlook on various socio-politics and economic issues. Leaders express the consensus of the entire editorial team as well as management of a media organization. As against this, an opinion piece is expression of an individual writer's viewpoint.

### Check Your Progress 2

1. Opinion writing in media, both news media as well as non-news media, should have the following characteristics: Timeliness, Subject Knowledge, Expertise, Clarity of Viewpoint, Unique/ Uncommon Opinion, Audience in Mind and Avoid Conflicts
2. While writing a good opinion piece, you should give special importance for the following components besides the subject areas - headline, intro, structure of the opinion piece, clarity of your language and style in which you are presenting your views.
3. Big news organizations can afford to have multiple columnists on diverse subjects, but small news organizations have less resources to be able to employ editorial staff to generate content. They prefer freelancers for the job. And that is your opportunity.