
UNIT 3 OPINION AND EDITORIAL WRITING

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3.1 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to :

- describe fundamentals of opinion and editorial writing;
- discuss the skills and judgement needed for writing and selection of opinion pieces;
- distinguish between news and views contents of newspapers;
- select topics for editorials; and
- distinguish between importance of editorials and other articles on the editorial page.

3.2 INTRODUCTION

This is Unit III in our block on Writing for the Press. In the previous Unit, i.e. Unit II, we discussed the skills of feature writing. In the next Unit, i.e. Unit IV, we will deal with feature and magazine writing.

Activity 1

It would be a good idea for you to get involved in an activity at this point of the Unit. You must be reading the editorial almost everyday. Many a times we read only one edition and read its editorials on various subject. Seldom do we compare editorials on a particular subject published by rival newspapers. Let us do that.

- Take two newspapers having editorials on the same theme. At least one editorial should have the same theme
- Study/read them

- Analyse and compare the thrust of the two editorials

The following performa may be of help to you:

Parameter	Editorial A	Editorial B
Title		
Main points		
Length		
Language		
Style		

3.3 QUALITY PEOPLE READ EDIT PAGE

As you know, newspapers are an important source of opinion making. This is done through every aspect of newspaper writing. Though newspapers have separate pages for news and views, opinions are at times interwoven with news items as explanations, backgrounds and interpretative paragraphs. This is so, particularly in respect of major developments and when the subject is not one with which the reader is expected to be familiar. Similarly, editorials or leader pieces contain essential background to support their arguments. Only a small section of readers or you can say quality people turn to the edit page. These quality people are often better aware of important news than ordinary ones. Therefore, sometimes it is assumed that readers of editorial pages are generally aware of what has appeared in the news pages to appreciate the arguments and conclusions.

The "edit page" of a newspaper is essentially an opinion page. It is a prestigious part of the newspaper, which often gets the direct attention of the editor. It reflects the policy of the newspaper and makes a major contribution to the shaping of its image.

At a typical meeting of the editorial writers in the morning, the editor would ask them: "What shall we write on?" The choice of subjects for editorial comment is mostly from the major developments of the day. The readers expect the newspaper to do its duty as opinion maker on major issues.

Daily newspaper mostly comment on political and economic developments, both domestic and international. Sports, crime and any odd happening is grist to the editorial writer's will. Business newspapers, of which now there are quite a few in the country, naturally devote a major portion of their editorials to economic and financial subjects and these tend to be specialised. Weeklies and other magazines ensure that their comment do not become out-dated until the next issue is out.

3.4 IMPORTANCE OF EDITORIALS

In his book 'The Press and America', Edwin Emery says that in the 17th century the papers in the big U.S. cities often printed pamphlets concerned with political and social issues. These pamphlets were offered to readers through the paper. By 1800, the day of the pamphlet had very nearly passed, and the editorial had supplanted it. Joshep Pulitzer, the famous U.S. newspaper man, used editorials for public purposes and his campaigns. Through news items and editorials, of his paper **World**, Pulitzer inaugurated a series of public services. Christmas dinners for the poor, free ice for tenement dwellers in summer, a staff of 35 doctors to serve the needy, to raise money for placing the Status of Liberty in New York. The **World's** editorials were of boundless coverage and were free from all sorts of advertising domination.

In Britain quality dailies give enough importance to their editorials. In his book *The Power of the Press* (1985 edition), Louis Hemen, former deputy editor of the **Times**, London, states that the reputation of the **Times** was of course build up on its fine news service, but the editorials took pride of the place. He says, "The dominance of news over opinion also led to a dichotomy of editorial control. In Britain the editor remained responsible for the entire contents of the paper and generally devoted a great deal of time to the editorials; in the United States the managing editor became responsible for news and the editorial page editor, the

junior partner, for opinion.

In India, all reputed dailies have their editorial columns. The pre-occupation of newspapers with political developments is a legacy of the days of our freedom struggle, but in course of time, this has given way to a wider perspective embracing economic, social and international developments. Since politics plays a major part in national life, its importance is reflected in the newspaper editorial pages. Social issues steal the editorial highlight on benchmark occasions such as the eruption of a caste or communal conflict or the occurrence of some heinous crime that shocks society. On such occasions, while presenting its views, the editor not only expresses his concern and anguish over the development, but also suggests remedies to prevent a recurrence of the problem.

On political issues, the line which each newspaper takes depends on its policy, outlook and political prediction. Newspapers' political leanings are reflected in the comments which they offer.

3.5 THE EDITORIAL PAGE

By now, you would have known how important is the editorial page in a newspaper. In fact, all newspapers with some standing pay extra attention to the editorial page. You must have noticed that generally newspapers do not publish any advertisements on the editorial page. Most often, the editorial pages, which are expected to mirror the policy of the newspaper, are given a serious, sometimes even a dull look. Until a few years ago, edit pages did not have any photographs or graphics. But of late things are changing and some newspapers now carry a photo on the edit page. On the edit page, generally, there are two/three edits in the first two-three columns of the page, one main article in the centre of the page, one or two small article(s) in columns 7-8 position. At the centre of the page is a light article, generally humorous, of human interest or informative. Since it is in the middle of the editorial page, it is also known as "middle". Besides, letters to the editor are also accommodated on the edit page. Sometimes, even a cartoon appears on this page.

If a newspaper has several editions such as The Times of India, the same editorials generally appear on the same position at all centres. This is essential for the overall personality of a newspaper, its image and for making an impact on a particular issue. However, it is not essential that in all editions of the same newspaper, everyone should carry the same editorials. During Rajendra Mathur's editorship, Nav Bharat Times regional editions were allowed to have editorials different from its Delhi editions.

During the 1992 general elections, in Britain, the Scottish edition of The Sun, Britain's largest selling tabloid daily, had a different editorial policy than that of the London edition.

On important occasions, newspapers in India some times give a front page position to the editorial on that subject. However, if we cast a look at the U.S. papers did not give front page editorials. The New York Herald Tribune did not give a front page editorial on November 25, 1963 when it gave to the nation the news of the assassination of President Kennedy. Similarly The Washington Post did not give any front page editorial when President Richard Nixon resigned. It must be noticed that Nixon resigned because of the Watergate Scandal, exposed by The Washington Post. Similarly The New York Times did not give any front page editorial, when the U.S. Supreme Court pronounced the historic judgement in its favour allowing the daily to publish Pentagon papers on the Vietnam war. The U.S. government asked the Supreme Court to impose injunction against The New York Times and restrain it from publishing the Vietnam war document.

Normally, newspapers do not carry photographs of the editor with the editorial. However, the Business Today, which is a magazine of the Indra Today group, published the photo of its proprietor-editor Aroon Purie alongwith his signed editorial in its issue of 7-21 January 1994.

One of the most reputed news magazine of Africa Weekly Review, published from Nairobi, also carry the photo of the editor alongwith the editorial.

On rare occasions newspapers publish editorials with the signature of the editor.

Check Your Progress 1

- Notes : i) Write your answers in the space provided below.
ii) Wherever necessary, tick the right answer.
iii) Compare your answers with the ones given at the end of this Unit.

1) What was the role of Pulitzer's editorials ?

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2) What is the status of edits in the British and the U.S. press ?

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3) Is it absolutely essential that all editions of the same paper should carry the same edits each day ?

Yes ()

No ()

4) What is meant by the 'middle' ?

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3.6 SHOULD EDITORIALS ALWAYS BE ADVERSARIAL

There is an unending debate on whether a newspaper should take a naturally adversarial role in relation to the administration or be content with offering constructive criticism as and when the occasion demands it. On 14 January 1981 the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, inaugurating the centenary celebrations of the Kesari founded by Lokmanya Balgangadhar Tilak said, that in free India enough had been said and written about the thorny relations between the government and the press. Neither a statesman nor an editor could have the last word. "What interests me more is the relationship between newspapers and the people. If editors and correspondents write for the people rather than for those in politics, their own effectiveness will increase and they will be able to serve the public better. The Lokmanya's message is valid as ever : "to be fearless and frank."

3.7 NEHRU ON EDITORIAL FREEDOM

The first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, whose speeches and writings educated a whole nation in the crucial days after independence, spoke of "freedom and licence" when he addressed the All-India Newspaper Editors Conference in New Delhi on December 3, 1950.

While upholding freedom of the press, Nehru asked the editors to remember that they had their obligations. He said : "We should have freedom by all means but we should try to maintain a certain integrity of approach to public activities."

Nehru said that the daily doze of thought, regularly given by newspapers affected the reader's mind.

If a reader is told to do this or that, he might resist; but the slight daily dose, if it is right, can improve his mind and, if it is wrong, can corrupt him.

In his speech at another AINEC meeting on September 17, 1952, Nehru presented his thoughts on various aspects of the functioning of the press. He pointed out that newspapers function in a difficult atmosphere: they had to say something quickly and they had not much time to think. There was no reason why newspapers should not have some amount of leisured thinking and wisdom — if not always — in the leading articles.

Interestingly, that was an occasion when Nehru had a dig at newspapermen, delightfully comparing them to politicians. He said: "To some extent, politicians and newspapermen or journalists have much in common. Both presume to talk too much, to write too much, to deliver homilies. Both, generally speaking, require no qualifications at all for their job. It does not mean that no politician or newspaperman has any qualification". Nehru pointed out that for any average profession — medicine, engineering or any other, a person had to go through a long course of training. He must obtain his degrees and diplomas, only then was he allowed to practice, but it was not so with politicians and newspapermen.

The moral is that a journalist should be well trained to put substantial content in his writings and take a balanced view of all developments. A distinct style adds to the effectiveness of the writing.

3.8 DEFINITIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF EDITORIALS

A conventional editorial may be defined as a critical interpretation of significant, usually contemporary, events so that the publication's typical reader will be informed, influenced or entertained. The word 'critical' is used as evaluating and not exclusively as fault-finding. In other words it usually is a considered statement of opinion.

An editorial may also be defined as a journalistic essay which either attempts (1) to inform or explain, (2) to persuade or convince, or (3) to stimulate insight in an entertaining or humorous manner. It has an introduction, a body and a conclusion.

The editorial articles are also called "leaders". News interpretation and background articles are different from the editorials in that they do not seek to convey the editorial views on the subject.

Lester Markel, a famous Sunday editor of the New York Times has said: "What you see is news; what you know is background; what you feel is opinion."

According to Joseph Pulitzer, the famous editor, newspapers should be "both a daily teacher and a daily tribune."

Newspaper also carry on their opinion pages from the contributions of columnists. The columnists are like lawyers presenting a particular point of view. One columnist might differ completely with another on the same subject and interpret the same development differently. Reading all shades of opinion on a major controversy would be helpful to the reader to arrive at his own conclusions and judgement.

• Check Your Progress 2

Notes : i) Write your answers in the space provided below.

ii) Compare your answers with the ones given at the end of this Unit.

1) What were the views of Lokmanya Gangadhar Tilak on newspaper contents ?

2) What is the similarity between a politician and a newspaperman ?

3) What can be the definition of editorial ?

4) What is Pulitzer's view about the role of a newspaper ?

Types of Editorials

Perhaps you would know that editorials are not always written by the editor of a newspaper/magazine. The editor of a big paper has a band of writers known as editorial writers, leader writers, assistant editors. Some of them are specialists such as on economics, international affairs (further sub-divided into global division — West Asia, Africa, Central Europe), disarmament, UN agencies, education, literature, law, science, media.

An editorial writers job is to study, and write the piece according to the style of their newspapers. Journalism text books of which there are many, particularly from the United States, which has a number of university journalism schools, classify editorials in different ways.

The classification could be according to the purpose of editorial, i.e. it may be informative, argumentative, or entertaining. An editorial may also be classified on the basis of its form of composition, i.e. it may be narrative, descriptive or expository. It can also be classified on the basis of its appeal to readers emotion or intellect. An editorial may also be classified on the basis of its contents which may be political, social, economic, historical, scientific, etc., grouped under local, national, regional and international heads.

Interpretative and explanatory editorials seek to expand the dimension of the news reports. Both type of editorials as well as reporters have to keep in view the requirements of a busy reader as well as of the well-read person with a critical mind. The general length of an editorial in most Indian newspapers is between 300 to 400 words. The reader may not have the time or patience to read longer pieces unless it is of gripping interest.

Most newspapers carry, atleast according to their style, one, two and some, three editorials daily. The total length of the editorial input for the day usually does not exceed 1,200 words, because they have to fit in the traditional space allotted for them every day.

An informative editorial about a major foreign development, for instance, would also provide the background to understand the development and explain to the reader what it means for the rest of the world. The historic background is useful in appreciating the significance of the development. An editorial on "power struggle in Afghanistan" in the National Herald on April 28, 1992, written on the confused situation after the exit of President Najibullah, noted "It is not only the various Mujahideen factions and the elements in the army which are attempting to form a loose coalition that are finding the going tough in creating some sort of an orderly set up to fill the vacuum. The backers of the main actors in the drama have ceased to count. The Soviet Union which sent troops into the country does not exist. The United States which funnelled arms and monetary aid into Mujahideen hands mainly through Pakistan is as help-

less as others to control the use of the weapons gifted. The United Nations has hopeful peace plan, but no means to implement it, as the UN Secretary-General, Dr. Boutros Ghali, found during his visit to the region. The UN like others has to learn to deal with the situation as it develops without much of a controlling voice."

This part of the editorial has put together various elements of the confusing situation only from published reports. Yet it offers its own comments. The editorial noted that in this situation "It is for the Afghans themselves to work out the arrangements for an orderly transition to stability and peace". The first imperative, however, is peace". The editor's conclusion reflected the government of India's policy on the issue which had wide national support.

The argumentative editorial tries to convince the reader about its point of view. To influence and mould public opinion has been one of the major objectives of editorial writers. Logic, techniques of propaganda, blowing one's trumpet, refuting the opponents view and playing on the emotions of the people are among the weapons in the armoury of editorial writers.

Some of the editorials merely "take note" of a development, for example, an earthquake or an air crash in a distant country that has caused the loss of a large number of lives. The editor has no particular opinion to offer, except to sympathise with the victims. A train accident or an air crash in one's own country on the other hand would involve an analysis of the factors that caused the mishap, finding out whether any one was at fault and a criticism of the authorities responsible for running the service.

Then there are editorials that amuse and entertain. The light pieces are usually published as the third edit by major English newspapers. Humour on the editorial pages adds to their appeal for the reader, whose interests are not confined to politics and economics. The fickle weather, innocent faux pass committed by those in authority, any unusual incident, literary controversies — subjects offering themselves for non-serious treatment are many.

The following example of a third edit (portions of which are reproduced) shows how the language is different from the grave, pontificating style of serious editorials. It was published by The Times of India on April 22, 1991 at the height of the grimly fought general election.

Odds and Ends

According to French proverb, there are two pleasures in gambling: winning and losing. To which might be added the cynical rider that the first pleasure is the preserve of those who set the odds and the second is reserved for those rash enough to accept them. Pleasure-seekers of both kinds are in evidence as the poll stakes draw closer, with the contenders linking up at the starting line, champing at the bit with impatience. With politics having become the sport of kingmakers, Bombay bookies — who correctly predicted the '89 winners — are having a field day. The current favourite seems to be the Congress, tipped to canter with 240 seats. Though the odds are likely to change closer to the event, the bookies are offering two and a half times the wagered amount if the Congress romps home with more than 250. Those who put their saffron shirt on the BJP stand to double their money if the rath rolls in with more than 125 seats. Even money is being offered on the JD pipping the competition at the post in more than 75 constituencies, and for real plungers, there is a 20-1 bonanza should JD(S) bag more than 50 seats ...

The editorial makes a reference to the gambler being a "great optimist" and notes in conclusion that in the current context "it's head you lose and tails they win, the gambler's only hope being that the coin stands on edge — which it may well do, despite all odds and ends."

It always helps if the editorial writer has in-depth knowledge about the subjects of general interest. A good knowledge about our history, culture, languages, religions, literature, social trends, fashion, film, music, sports, politics etc. can make one's editorial extremely good.

3.9 POLICY, STYLE AND GUIDELINES

While the editorial represent the policy of the newspaper, the selection of articles of opinion from writers outside does not depend on endorsement of their views by the newspaper concerned. The edit page articles are meant to broaden the horizon of news and opinion coverage. The same role is played by letters to the editor. The articles are generally of 1,200 to 1,800 words. Some of them combine in themselves the presentation of facts as well as opinion.

Some articles are useful as backgrounders.

The cartoon is also a sort of opinion piece. While the cartoonist cannot violate editorial policy, he enjoys a wide latitude in depicting big personalities as ordinary men and punching the baloon of lofty statements.

Activity 2

Cartoons from a very important element in a newspaper. What may be said in a thousand words and still may remain unclear could be said in a small cartoon with a real punch.

- Collect a weeks edition of the Times of India.
- Collect a weeks editions of another newspaper say The Hindustan Times or The Statesman or The Hindu etc.
- Put out the cartoons of the Times and paste them on a sheet of paper. Do the same with the cartoons of the other newspaper
- Write the message of each cartoon in a sentence or two
- compare and contrast the themes of cartoons of The Times with that of the other newspaper you have chosen..

In selecting news as well as opinion pieces, certain standards have to be maintained. The elementary principle is that they should not be defamatory or offend good taste, the annual reports of the Press Council of India, which gives details of the complaints against authorities and the press, contains guidelines which would be helpful both to the reporter and the leader writer.

When dealing with communal and regions matters, the press is expected to exercise due care and caution so that unhealthy and communal passions are not roused.

The complaint of defamation cannot stand against bonafide reporting of the proceedings of Parliament or that of a law court, of course if they are not sitting in camera.

In some of the cases dealt with by the Press Council, it has laid down the following principles;

Sensational headlines with incorrect innuendos lend an unethical character to publications:

An editor is expected to verify facts before publishing any article likely to damage the reputation of a person, institution or organization.

Editorials should not use irresponsible, filthy or scurrilous comments.

Any comment against the administration or any person must be based on information, the accuracy of which has been carefully checked and verified from authentic sources. Even after such verification, the comments should be couched in decent, dignified and restrained language.

Editorials conceived in bad taste bordering on scurrility and with a motive to denigrate, cannot be said to be good ones.

It is gross impropriety for a newspaper to publish a fabricated or concocted story, and also an editorial on it.

Contradiction pertaining to defamatory articles containing personal allegations should be published promptly with due prominence.

3.10 LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the editor are published usually in the opinion columns. Though an editor cannot be expected to publish all letters representing various points of view on a controversial matter, he is expected to make an honest endeavour to select and publish a balanced gist of these letters on the issue.

Though an editor enjoys wide discretion in the matter of selection of letters, readers enjoying certain locus stand on an issue should be allowed to air their views.

If in the opinion of an editor, an article or news items submitted for publication could be liable to legal proceedings or any future complications, its publication would rest on the discretion of the editor since it is he who is answerable for anything published in the paper.

The editorial is a journalistic essay, its title should aim to inform the reader about the subject of the editorial and arouse his interest. The simplest form of editorial structure is to state the subject and to comment on it. In writing an editorial, a pattern may be employed:

- (1) the statement of the subject;
- (2) the expansion of the subject by means of comment; and
- (3) an application or conclusion drawn from the comment.

3.11 DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EDITORIAL AND OTHER NEWSPAPER WRITINGS

About the distinction between the various types of writing in newspaper it should be said that the news story is an essay which combines the elements of exposition and narration, which normally does not contain opinions. Special feature article is an essay which combines the same two elements of style, but is longer, contains little or no opinion, and is a looser and freer form of composition. The editorial, however, is a compact essay of exposition or argumentation. An editorial is normally of not more than 300-400 words. It contains virtually no elements of narration, and represents the opinion of the institution, i.e. the newspaper, rather than that of the individual writer.

1 Check Your Progress 3

Notes : i) Write your answers in the space provided below.

ii) Compare your answers with the ones given at the end of this Unit.

1) What are the classification of editorials? Name them.

- (a)
- (b)
- (c)
- (d)

2) What are the weapons in the armoury of an argumentative editorial writer ?

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3) What is the role of articles, columns and letters to the editor?

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3.12 LET US SUM UP

The Editorials and articles are read by quality people. An editorial is a voice of the newspaper. It differs from other articles which are opinions of individual writers. Articles, columns,

letters to the editor and cartoons are the ways by which a newspaper provides different opinions on a particular topic. An editorial may be informative, argumentative or entertaining. Big newspapers have a team of experts for edit writing. The general length of an editorial in most Indian newspapers is between 300 to 400 words, whereas other articles are longer in size and are generally of 1,200 to 1,800 words. Letters to the editors are usually published on edit page of daily newspapers. Though no editor can be expected to publish all letters, he is expected to make an honest endeavour to select and publish a balanced gist of these letters on a particular issue. An editor has a discretionary right to publish or not to publish any letter or article in his paper.

3.13 SUGGESTED READING

- 1) *The professional Journalist* by John Holenberg (19..) Henery Holt & Co. New York.
- 2) *The Press and America* by Edwin Emery.

3.14 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : MODEL ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Pulitzer used his editorials for public and his campaigns which included Christmas dinner for the poor, free ice for tenements dwellers in summer and raising money for placing the statue of Liberty in New York.
- 2) In Britain the editor of quality newspapers like *The Times*, *The Guardian*, etc., remains responsible for the entire contents of the paper and devotes a great deal of time to the editorials. On the other hand in the United States the editorial page editor, the junior partner of the editor, is largely responsible for newspaper opinion.
- 3) No
- 4) "Middle" is a small and light article printed in the middle of the editorial page.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The contents should be frank and fearless.
- 2) The profession of both of them do not need any minimum educational qualification.
- 3) An editorial is a considered opinion of the newspaper on any specific matter. Indian papers usually carry editorials of 300 to 400 words.
- 4) A newspaper should be both a daily teacher and daily tribune.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) a) Informative, argumentative or entertaining editorials
b) Political, social, economic, historical and scientific editorials
c) Local, regional, national and international editorials
d) Interpretative and explanatory editorials.
- 2) Logic, techniques of propaganda, blowing one's trumpet, refuting and opponent's views and playing on emotions of the people are among the weapons in the armoury of an argumentative editorial writer.
- 3) While an edit is the voice of the newspaper, other articles, columns and letters to the editors are meant to broaden the horizon of news and opinion coverage.