

---

# Writing an Op-Ed: Teaching Students to Write for Public Audiences, not Researchers

STP's Annual Conference on Teaching 2022  
Steven Zhou • 10.21.2022

---

---

# Hi! I'm Steven

- Ph.D. candidate in organizational psychology at George Mason University
- Research areas: leadership, psychometrics, and the academic-practitioner gap
- Prior work experience in HR analytics and college student affairs
- Frequent contributor to popular press outlets (e.g., *Fast Company*)



@szzhou4



[linkedin.com/in/szzhou4](https://www.linkedin.com/in/szzhou4)



[szhou9@gmu.edu](mailto:szhou9@gmu.edu)

---

# Why does this matter?

- Traditional academic writing is difficult to read, overly complicated, and generally inaccessible to the public
  - Most undergraduate students will not go on to become academic researchers... instead, they will need to take the knowledge gained in our classrooms and communicate it to their colleagues, friends, and supervisors
  - Writing for public audiences uses skills and methods that are vastly different from academic writing
-

---

# Principles of Op-Ed Writing

*(especially those that differ from academic writing)*

- Flip the order: main takeaway/conclusion first, then rationale
  - Paragraphs as phrases, not as topic sentence + proof  
(try speaking your piece out loud, pause between paragraphs)
  - Short and sweet: fewer prepositional phrases, shorter sentences (average of < 15 words, as opposed to 20-30 in journals), total of only ~800 words
  - There's no room for hedging: focus on takeaway actions and memorable phrases
  - Speed is of essence: information becomes outdated quickly, and readers want to know the relevance to current events
  - Practice your pitch: most editors will only take short 1-2 paragraph email pitches rather than submitting your entire article
-

---

**Let's Practice!**

---

—

1. Choose a topic: let's say we want to write an article about the myth of learning styles in education...
2. Write a 1-2 sentence takeaway message. What is the main point you will communicate in your op-ed?
3. Identify your “hook” that will open your article and capture your readers’ attention. Many editors will want this to be linked to current events. Look up recent news articles in your target outlet.
4. Come up with 2-3 “Tweet-able” phrases to use in your body. Usually these sentences summarize evidence that you provide in your body that contribute towards your main takeaway message.

---

# An example pitch

Hi Diana,

My name is Steven Zhou, and I am a PhD student in psychology at George Mason University, where I research personality measurement especially in workplace settings. I'd like to submit an original piece, *Three warnings to consider the next time you talk about personality at work*, to be considered for publication at *Fast Company*. In it, I describe three concerns for why most popular personality tests are flawed in their theory, measurement method, and assumptions of personality stability. I end with a discussion on why personality does in fact matter for work, and the best way to approach it in a work setting.

Given recent articles, including some at *Fast Company*, that have been published discussing why personality is important for work, I believe this piece is a relevant and helpful perspective drawn from scientific research on personality. I've pasted the piece (861 words) below for your consideration. It is a complete and unpublished article. Thank you in advance for your consideration!

---

---

qualifications

catchy title

main point

action-oriented  
takeaway

current events  
relevance

word count

---

# An example pitch

Hi Diana,

My name is Steven Zhou, and I am a PhD student in psychology at George Mason University, where I research personality measurement especially in workplace settings. I'd like to submit an original piece, *Three warnings to consider the next time you talk about personality at work*, to be considered for publication at *Fast Company*. In it, I describe three concerns for why most popular personality tests are flawed in their theory, measurement method, and assumptions of personality stability. I end with a discussion on why personality does in fact matter for work, and the best way to approach it in a work setting.

Given recent articles, including some at *Fast Company*, that have been published discussing why personality is important for work, I believe this piece is a relevant and helpful perspective drawn from scientific research on personality. I've pasted the piece (861 words) below for your consideration. It is a complete and unpublished article. Thank you in advance for your consideration!

---



---

# Opportunities for more practice

- Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science: resources and workshops for science communication (<https://aldacenter.org>)
  - Beyond the Ivory Tower: workshops led by NYT editor for early career faculty to write and submit op-eds (<https://www.beyondtheivorytower.com>)
  - ComSciCon: workshops on science communication for graduate students (<https://comscicon.com>)
  - Psychologist Media: helping psychology researchers share their research with the public (<https://psychgeistmedia.org>)
  - Footnote: helping researchers from various fields share their research with the public (<https://footnote.co>)
  - Researchable: short-form communication of research evidence to the public (<https://www.researchable.info>)
  - Young Voices: talent agency and PR firm for young writers under 35 to practice op-ed writing (<https://www.young-voices.com>)
  - Your local school newspaper!
-

# Thank you!



@szzhou4



[linkedin.com/in/szzhou4](https://www.linkedin.com/in/szzhou4)



[szhou9@gmu.edu](mailto:szhou9@gmu.edu)

---

—

1. Choose a recent academic article (one you've published, or one of you've read) that you find interesting and applicable to the public
2. Write a 1-2 sentence takeaway message based on the article. What is the main point you will communicate in your op-ed?
3. Identify your "hook" that will open your article and capture your readers' attention. Many editors will want this to be linked to current events. Look up recent news articles in your target outlet.
4. Come up with 2-3 "Tweet-able" phrases to use in your body. Usually these sentences summarize evidence that you provide in your body that contribute towards your main takeaway message.