

Reading Newspapers: editorial and opinion pieces ^[1]

While readers generally turn to newspapers for unbiased factual reporting, newspapers also typically include a fair bit of opinion. Opinion may be woven into news articles, it may appear in specific opinion pieces written by the editor or the editorial board ("editorials"), it may appear in the writings of individual columnists, or it may appear in editorial cartoons or other parts of the newspaper.

Newspapers and political bias

Historically, some newspapers have had a particular editorial bent, leaning in one political direction or another. In some larger communities, there might be two or more newspapers, each with a strong affiliation with a particular political party or set of political ideals. Readers could then choose the newspaper that they wished to read based on their own interests. Journalists today typically strive to maintain objectivity -- presenting a story without bias -- but readers can still choose from among many different media outlets, and there are still often distinct differences in the ways in which different newspapers, television news channels, and radio networks present news about the same issues.

Finding and identifying opinion in the newspaper

Today, most newspapers set aside particular sections of the newspaper for columns, illustrations, and letters that express opinion, clearly separating factual reporting from these less objective features. Newspapers often have an editorial section that features the opinions of editors and, frequently in the same section of the newspaper, an Op-Ed page that features other opinions. However, it's important to remember historical newspapers were not always organized like the newspapers we read today, so you may find opinion columns mixed in with "news" in a historical newspaper without a section heading or other marker to help you tell which is which.

Editorials

The opinion of the editor or editorial board of a newspaper will often appear in an official statement from the editor(s) called an *editorial*. Editorials are a newspaper's official stance on specific issues and can cover politics as well as social or cultural issues. Editorial boards will often endorse candidates in upcoming elections, and reading the editorials from various newspapers on the same topic can give the researcher a good sense of the general political leaning of a particular source. Editorials are usually separated from news reporting so that readers can know when they are reading a factual new report that tries to be objective and when they are reading the opinion of the editors of the newspaper.

Cartoons

Editors are not the only people whose opinions appear in newspapers, though. Often, newspapers employ cartoonists who draw and write editorial cartoons ^[2] that make a statement about current events. These cartoons often focus on politics, but can also take on economic, social, and cultural issues. Editorial cartoons have appeared in newspapers for most of American history, though styles have changed over time.

Columns

Newspapers often also employ other writers to offer their individual opinions in the newspaper. While these columnists do research, they do not write factual news stories but rather their own personal views on events.

In addition to employing columnists directly to write for their newspapers, editors sometimes include the writings of *syndicated* columnists whose opinion columns appear in many different newspapers. The columns of George Will of the *Washington Post* and Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times*, for example, are published in other newspapers across the country.

Some columnists focus on particular issues such as national politics, local current events, food, parenting, or sports. Others write on a variety of topics. By reading several columns by the same writer, a researcher can begin to determine the writer's attitudes and politics more broadly.

Letters to the editor

One can also find opinions from readers in the Letters to the Editor section of the newspaper. You can learn more about reading those letters in the learner's guide to Reading Newspapers: Reader Contributions ^[3].

Key questions

Regardless of the location of an opinion in the newspaper, it may be worthwhile to consider the following questions when you encounter opinion:

Whose opinion is being expressed?

Is the opinion in this part of the newspaper that of the editorial staff, of a local columnist or cartoonist, of a syndicated columnist or cartoonist, or of someone else? What do you know about the person or people whose opinions are expressed? It can sometimes be helpful to read several opinion pieces from the same source to get a sense of the individual or editorial board's views on a number of issues so that you can start to identify common themes.

What is the topic of this editorial, column, or cartoon and what opinions are expressed about the topic?

Of course, you'll want to make sure that you understand what the column or cartoon is about, which may take some background research, and what the author or cartoonist was trying to say about the topic. It may be helpful to read some news stories about the topic from the same or other newspapers -- these may be found in the days or weeks preceding the opinion piece that you are analyzing.

How does the writer or cartoonist make his or her point?

Writers and cartoonists can present their opinions in a variety of ways, using logic, humor, appeals to emotion, or other rhetorical devices to present their ideas. They may draw parallels between current events and history or try to use metaphors to make a particular point. They may present specific pieces of evidence (quotations, statistics, historical details, etc.) that support their main arguments. Try to figure out not just what the opinion writer was trying to say, but also how he or she said it and why he or she might have chosen to say it in that way.

Which readers might find this argument compelling?

Think about who would be convinced by the opinion piece that you read. Does the column present an argument that would appeal to people with particular ideas (for example, conservatives) but fall flat with people who held other ideas (liberals)? Does the cartoon poke fun at a particular idea in a way that some people might find funny while others might find offensive? Is this opinion piece designed to sway people to the author's point of view in an inviting and balanced way, or is it a more *partisan* piece that is written primarily for people who already agree with the author?

What other opinions might be expressed about the same topic and who might express them?

When considering an opinion, it can be very helpful to try to imagine all of the other opinions that one could possibly hold about the same topic. How might someone who completely disagrees frame his or her argument to refute this opinion piece? What evidence might they use to support that opposite point of view? You may be able to find opinion pieces that present alternative viewpoints and, if so, it can be very interesting to explore several different opinions on the same topic to get a sense of the range of journalistic opinion on the issue.

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