

Communicating Psychological Science: Why You Should Write an Op-Ed—and How to Start

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Imagine this: After months (or years) of hard work, your research has finally been accepted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. You're relieved, delighted, and proud—and, if we're being completely honest, you probably want to take an extended break from the project. But before you move on to your next commitment, you may want to consider sharing your findings with a broader audience. Here, we offer some advice on whether and how to write an opinion piece, or op-ed, for a media outlet—but note that many of these lessons extend to other forms of engagement with the public, from Twitter threads, podcasts, and blog posts to university press releases and media interviews.

Sharing research with the public takes time that could be devoted to other pursuits, so it is essential to consider whether doing so is worthwhile. We believe that researchers whose work is publicly funded have a responsibility to share important insights with the taxpayers who footed the bill. Indeed, major granting agencies often require researchers to engage in some form of “knowledge mobilization” to secure future funding.



Elizabeth W. Dunn, University of British Columbia

But beyond such responsibilities, we have found it immensely satisfying to see our research get into the hands of people who can use it—and writing an op-ed can help make that happen. For example, after spending months working on an academic review paper about mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, we devoted one additional week to writing an op-ed summarizing our key insights. Although the [academic article](#) was published in a prominent journal (APS's *Perspectives on Psychological Science*), many people learned about the findings through the op-ed published in *The Atlantic*. In fact, the op-ed reached the U.S. Surgeon General's office and led to a meeting about our findings. Similarly, after writing an [op-ed](#) about harnessing psychological research to promote worldwide vaccination, we got the opportunity to meet with leaders of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) about their campaign to deliver COVID-19 vaccines to millions of people in low-income countries.

Although the primary goal of writing op-eds is to share research with the public, we have found that our research is also more likely to be cited by other scholars when results are shared as an op-ed. For example, a [paper](#) that we published in *Computers in Human Behavior* has been cited many more times than similar papers we have published in more prestigious journals. We believe this occurred partly because we wrote an [op-ed](#) about this work in *The New York Times*. It's possible that even our fellow psychologists enjoy reading *The New York Times* more than academic journals.



Lara B. Aknin, Simon Fraser University

Finally, we believe that encouraging graduate students to get involved in sharing research with the public can help them become more skilled and confident in discussing their work. Framing research in an engaging way for nonspecialists is a valuable skill. So, if communicating science to the public makes you nervous, our advice is to do it more!

If you're ready to get started, try writing a one-paragraph pitch describing the op-ed you envision. It would be worthwhile to get in touch with your university's press office, if relevant. Staff there may be able to connect you directly with editors at media outlets and help you craft a press release to generate initial media attention. If one of your colleagues can connect you with an editor they have worked with in the past, that's even better. Although most media outlets accept submissions from anyone, a personal introduction from a colleague goes a long way. Another approach is to write a brief, compelling thread about your research on Twitter. After we wrote a [thread](#) about our research comparing introverts and extroverts during the pandemic, an editor at the *Washington Post* reached out with an invitation to write an [op-ed](#).

Keep in mind that if an editor invites you to write an op-ed, they may expect a quick turnaround—you might have as little as one week to produce a draft, so be ready to put other commitments aside. To help you make your first draft as strong as possible, here are some tips that we keep in mind when working on an op-ed:

1. Identify your contribution.

- Before you begin, ask yourself “What makes this work interesting?” or “So what?” Does your work challenge long-held assumptions, pose new puzzles, or offer new insight into an important issue? One way to identify the most interesting nugget is to figure out what excites *you* most about this work—and share that message with others.
- Editors are more likely to be interested in your work if it seems timely. So, we recommend working on an op-ed as soon as your paper has been accepted for publication to make sure the research seems “fresh.” Another way to highlight the timeliness of your work is to link your findings to current events in the news, or even an upcoming holiday (for example, on Christmas

Eve, we published an [op-ed](#) on generosity).

2. Communicate clearly.

- Once you have identified the interesting finding you have to share, try making the strongest statement that you believe your data can support. See if you can summarize your key insight in a single declarative sentence.
- Readers should not have to make it to the end of your piece to understand the central message. If there is an idea you want all readers to get, try to put it right up front.
- Make your case with clear and memorable examples. An op-ed is not the place for a never-ending list of facts and figures that readers will soon forget. If you published a seven-study paper, you are not obligated to describe all seven studies. Instead, consider describing the study that provides the most vivid demonstration of the central idea you want to convey.
- As psychologists, we know that effect sizes matter, but typical effect-size metrics won't mean anything to most readers. Consider whether you can convey your effect size in a meaningful and intuitive way. For example, in our [op-ed](#) on generosity, we explained that spending money on others lowered blood pressure by about the same amount as starting an aerobic exercise program.
- Try to imagine how people might misinterpret your research, and confront these potential misinterpretations directly. For example, learning that generosity might lower blood pressure could lead people to neglect other important therapies, so we reminded people not to stop taking their antihypertensive medications, no matter how many Christmas presents they had bought.

3. Check your style.

- Use short sentences. Your piece may be a reader's first experience with the topic. Short, digestible statements are easier to understand.
- Break your text into mini-paragraphs that are one to three sentences long. Shorter chunks of text are simpler to process.
- Keep your op-ed short by focusing on the key content. Interested readers can track down your published work for additional details.
- Feel free to use an informal tone. Academic jargon will turn readers off. Embrace the opportunity and challenge that comes with communicating your key insights in everyday language.

4. Write with integrity.

- Most journal articles include a laundry list of limitations. Op-eds should also discuss important limitations, but take this as an opportunity to consider which limitations are most essential. For example, if your research was conducted with a sample of undergraduate students in North America, you should consider whether readers need to know that the results might not generalize across ages and cultures.
- Writing an op-ed allows you to emphasize aspects of the study that you believe are important.

This is true for the central finding and for features of the study’s design as well. For instance, you can mention that your study was preregistered and why that is valuable. You can also stress features like the size and nature of your sample. Op-eds give you an opportunity to express your own research values.

- If your message morphs in the hands of an editor, you can and should push back to ensure accuracy. Editors might encourage you to clarify your ideas and message for greater impact, but that shouldn’t come at the cost of accuracy.
- Editors usually choose the headline that will appear with your article—and many people will read only the headline. So, if the editor selects a bold headline that makes you uncomfortable, it is worthwhile to politely explain why you can’t stand behind it.

[See all Communicating Psychological Science columns](#)

Writing for a general audience is something that many of us were not trained to do, so don’t hesitate to seek out support. For example, the new nonprofit [Psychgeist Media](#) helps researchers share their research with the public, including supporting scholars in crafting op-eds. Most importantly, be kind to yourself; like writing for other scholars, writing for the public is a skill that takes time to hone. We have had many more op-ed pitches rejected than accepted over the years.

But the effort is worth it. We have found that sharing our research in this way has sharpened our thinking and writing. When we write for the public, we have to make every sentence clear and engaging. Practicing this approach has helped us make our academic articles better, too.

Indeed, sharing our work with the public has forced us to confront gaps between what we would like to be able to tell the public and what we can claim. For example, in 2008, we published an article titled “Spending Money on Others Promotes Happiness,” which made—as the title suggests—a rather broad claim. This paper received worldwide media attention. Journalists and members of the public asked us challenging questions. In particular, they wondered whether these benefits would emerge only in wealthy nations, such as the United States and Canada—the only countries in which we had conducted research. These questions spurred us to conduct additional experiments in other countries, such as Uganda and South Africa. Interestingly, when we eventually submitted our cross-cultural research for publication in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#), one reviewer questioned whether it was important to show that our earlier findings replicated in diverse cultural contexts.

As this example highlights, the broader public may not always agree with scholars in our own field about research priorities—and we think that sometimes, the broader public may be right. As scholars who study human thought and behavior, communicating our ideas to those humans isn’t just a responsibility—it’s an opportunity to learn from them.

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