



Issue 3 • July 18, 2022

Welcome to the third issue of PJP's "The Mighty Pen," a newsletter with writing and reporting tips for incarcerated writers looking to develop journalistic skills and get published in PJP and elsewhere. In this issue, we will discuss opinion articles (also known as op-eds).

JOURNALISM BASICS: OP-EDS VS. RANTS

While journalists generally avoid inserting personal opinions in news stories, they sometimes write op-ed articles in which they explain a certain situation and then make a case that something should or should not be happening. (Example: a story that recounts your experience with a particular prison program through which you offer an argument for how to improve it).

When writing an opinion piece, you must explain the reasons for your opinion and methodically offer some facts that support it to persuade the reader. These facts can be a mixture of data, the results of a study or survey, your observations and experiences, and more. You must also mention possible counter-arguments and refute them matter of factly.

When you believe in something strongly, it's easy to get emotional, perhaps even angry at those who disagree with you. It's also tempting to stereotype the reader. (Example: "You probably assume we are all XXX!!!").

But put yourself in your reader's shoes. You would probably stop reading a piece if the writer appeared angry at you, wrote in ALL CAPS (the writing equivalent of screaming), or used lots of exclamation marks. Or if they accused you of being ignorant or prejudiced against you. Or if they essentially said, "Well, that's my opinion! End of matter, subject closed."

Think about it: Are you trying to plant a seed in someone's mind or do you just want to shout at them? The first is an op-ed. The second is a rant.

My advice: Treat everyone with respect. Instead of dismissing the other side's arguments, respond to it in a paragraph or two and make a counterpoint. Don't assume that your readers are ignorant. Many readers, especially those who read PJP stories, are knowledgeable, and they are taking in your story to further expand their perspective. You want readers to tell others about the thought-provoking opinion article that you wrote.

TRY THIS!

Go talk to someone who has an opinion you don't agree with. Ask them to explain their opinion to you. Don't interrupt, don't argue. Just listen and take notes. Jot down each argument and the proof offered in support of it. Think about what the speaker could have said to make their arguments stronger. Then consider how you would go about challenging each one of their arguments.

REPORTING TIPS: BEING TRANSPARENT

Before you interview someone, make sure they understand they are talking to a reporter (not a friend) and that whatever they tell you could be published and read by everyone they know (including their family, their cellies, the COs, etc.). Make sure that they are OK with being identified in the story by their full name.

If they are not, ask if you can publish their first name only or their initials with a general description of who they are (Example: a 53-year-old man who has been incarcerated for X years). If race is relevant to your story, add their race. Ask why they do not want you to mention their first name, so you can include the reason in a brief note. (Example: “a 53-year-old Black man, who has been incarcerated for X years and asked to be unnamed for fear of reprisal”). See what information they are comfortable with. Can you say they live in North Block?

Professional journalists outside offer people anonymity only if they can convince them that being identified as a source could endanger or jeopardize their lives in some way. This is because anonymous sources make the reader skeptical that the story is true. We understand that the stakes are often higher behind bars. The best way to be sure that PJP is not endangering anyone while also helping you be sure the story is credible to readers is for you to provide as much information as possible.

WRITING TIP: DON'T USE JARGON

The stories published by PJP will be read by many people who have never been incarcerated. They will not understand prison jargon, so avoid using it. If you use a quote with jargon in it, explain what it means. Here are a few terms that readers who have never seen the inside of a prison might not be familiar with: bid, cellie, CO, commissary, count, dayroom, duck, the Hole (the SHU, the Box, AdSeg, etc.), LWOP, OG, parole board, patch, protective custody, shakedown. They might also not know the difference between the various prison security levels.

ASK RAZ!

Ms. Lexie in Missouri asked: "When it comes to verifying facts, since we do not have access to the Internet, do you have any suggestions to help ensure we have the most accurate information?"

In the absence of the Internet, use everything else you have access to. Consult the prison library. Reference a newspaper article or book. See if there's any way you can make your piece richer. Ask people you communicate with regularly to verify information for you. You can also add a note in your piece, saying what kind of data or fact you wish you could put in your story. PJP editors will add the information if they can (no promises). The most important thing is to be sure that everything you include in your article is accurate.

What do you wanna know about journalism? Send a JPay message to PJP, Attn: Coach Raz, and we'll do our best to answer it in future issues of The Mighty Pen.

This is it for today. If you know other writers who would like to receive this newsletter, send us their name and prison ID, so we can add them to our JPay. You can also send a message with your mailing address to request our Introduction to Journalism handout.

Best,
Raz and PJP Editors

For Securus/GTL/Getting Out (maximum is 2,000 characters. Please send in three parts as follows)

THE MIGHTY PEN - Issue 3 (July 18, 2022) - Part I

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PART II

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PART III

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