



MIDSTATE EDITORIALS

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As I See It, Heather Long »

Want to be published in The Patriot-News? Here are some insider tips

By HEATHER LONG, The Patriot-News

January 10, 2010, 6:17PM

This column is for those who want to get published on The Patriot- News' op-ed pages (and on Pennlive.com/opinion) in 2010.

What does it take? Well, the greatest length anyone went to last year to be published was to leave me a bag of gifts at the front desk. (Sadly, I was not allowed to accept it).

More often, I get several phone calls and e-mails a week asking: "What are you looking for?" as if there is a magic code word that if you include it in your article, you're in.



Answering this question is rather like answering what makes a "winning" college application essay. There are many "winners" of different tones and sizes, but space is at a premium and, I'm sorry to say, not everyone gets in.

First the basics. For those who have bothered to look up the official guidelines on our Web site or in print, you know the spiel: "650 words or fewer on a subject you have interest, experience or special knowledge of. Please include your contact information." (As most of our regular writers know, we also ask for your photo).

To be candid, 650 words is a bit of a fib. We regularly print pieces up to 700 or 750 words. That said, shorter pieces have a better chance of getting in the paper simply because space is limited.

The main criterion simple: We are looking first and foremost for a good read. We get about two to three dozen submissions a week and can only print around 10. Most arrive by e-mail, although some still come by fax and mail. (One or two even arrived last year handwritten on pastel stationery.)

It's my job to read them all. It's your job to stand out. I am looking for something that makes me stop in my busy day and say, "I hadn't thought about it like that," and then want run to tell a colleague about it.

What kind of pieces tend to get that reaction? Again, it's hard to pinpoint, but let me offer an example: I have seen hundreds of op-eds on health care — at least one a day. Naturally, there's a much higher bar to cross to get my attention on that topic.

In comparison, I have received only one humorous op-ed warning about the perils of hyphenating your last name when you get married. It grabbed me because it was unexpected.

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It's good to write about timely issues, and it's good to be different — whether in your angle or in your subject matter.

I often get asked if there are other requirements besides word length. None officially, although I will admit we have a bias toward Pennsylvania (especially midstate) authors and topics that have a state or local connection.

We have access to lots of national commentary pieces from major newspapers. They tend to write about health care, Afghanistan and whatever the White House is talking about that week. But Paul Krugman, George Will and columnists in their league don't often write about Harrisburg.

Probably the biggest misconception is that we only print pieces we agree with. Wrong. In fact, that's the whole reason op-ed pages exist. Op-ed literally means "opposite the editorial page," which also works metaphorically. It's a space for views that are counter to our editorials (and regular columnists).

There are only two big no-no's in op-ed writing. The first is not to respond directly to someone else's op-ed or an article in The Patriot-News. We believe that op-eds should "stand on their own" arguments. So please don't send in something that goes line by line through someone else's piece and refutes it. We have a space for that — letters to the editor. In fact, we print six to nine letters most days, so your chances of getting in the paper are much greater if you write a letter than an op-ed.

The other pitfall to avoid is what I have come to dub "extremist phrases." There have been many occasions when I am reading an op-ed that I think is pretty good and then, about halfway through there will be a phrase along the lines of "President Obama is Hitler" or "The governor is a slimeball" or "All elected officials are crooks." You get the idea.

While we respect everyone's right to free speech, we are looking for intellectual arguments, not talk-show-radio-style jabs. Well-written op-eds make their case that a policy or politician's stance is wrong without having to explicitly say that policy or person smells like a used baby diaper.

Finally, The Patriot-News calls op-eds "As I See It" pieces for a reason — everyone has a voice. We don't just want to hear from "big wigs," nor do we just want political commentaries. Reflections on topics like deer hunting, adoption or dealing with life's unexpected turns are just as powerful.

In 2010, I look forward to reading your views. Asiseeit@pnco.com. And to reiterate, I can't accept bribes, nor can I pay you.

Heather Long is deputy editorial page editor. 255-8104 or hlong@pnco.com.

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