Editorials

You’ve learned through your journalism lessons that a writer’s opinion should not appear in a news story. But that’s not to say that opinions are meritless. They have their place. "Opinion pieces" represent a handy and effective tool for getting information to your various publics via persuasive editorials or commentaries. You will likely ghost-write editorials for your commander. With that comes the responsibility of advising the commander when an editorial will achieve communication goals better than a simple article. This also implies that you need to regularly read the editorial pages of your local, regional and national papers.
Editorials

An editorial is defined as the expression of an informed opinion with the avowed intention of persuading the readers to accept that opinion.

Editorials date back to the days of the American Revolution, when Americans fought for the right to speak their minds and publish news that criticized the king. With the Constitution and the First Amendment, the editorial became a regular and important part of the American newspaper. Unfortunately, they sometimes lacked factual context and were often nothing more than emotional venting, which is not the function of a military editorial.

It’s important to understand the differences between news and editorial content. News writing is straight, factual and free of any assertions from the writer. It’s a presentation of the facts absent taking any particular position on those facts. The formal editorial deals almost entirely with making a case and expressing opinion. The feature article is somewhere between the characteristics of news writing and editorial writing, dealing specifically with human interest topics.

The military editorial, in particular, gives the commander a chance to discuss policies or address issues and present his or her arguments for or against them. It is a tool readers use to interpret the opinions of the experts on issues or events. If desired, readers can generate feedback on organizational or Department of Defense issues.

Most editorials fall into two general categories: “issue” editorials and “broad theme” editorials. Issue-driven editorials are usually closely related to the news. The news can be national, regional, local or something that affects the internal audience. Broad-themed editorials may be harder to write because they deal with beliefs and attitudes that are large in scope.

Military papers generally address topics unique to service members such as customs and courtesies, core values, why we have certain ceremonies, wearing the uniform properly, saluting, Veterans Day, Memorial Day, other holidays, etc. If you can tie your broad-themed editorial to a current issue or vice-versa, so much the better. For example, an editorial about the value of service is going to resonate with readers more around Memorial Day or Veteran’s Day. In that piece, the writer could explain how upholding our military customs and courtesies is one way for service members to honor those that served before them.

Military editorials may explain new policies or regulations, especially unpopular ones. They can be used to put these new policies in perspective and advocate for their smooth acceptance throughout the ranks. Military editorials may also applaud achievement, address philosophical topics or use humor, satire and dialog to stimulate insight in an entertaining manner.

At times, editorials can persuade readers to another point of view, but they must consider other opinions, be logical, and contain well-researched, solid arguments. They should involve the reader personally, take a definitive stand and conclude with a positive, doable call-to-action.

It’s important that you get approval before running sensitive editorials. Stick to issues with clear local, regional or service ties. You and your commander will have to decide what is appropriate. At the end of the day, all content your office produces must meet the commander’s communication goals.
Editorial Policy

Taking sides is an American tradition, but you cannot endorse a political candidate for any office on behalf of your command. This prohibition is covered by the Hatch Act of 1939. It's best to stick to apolitical military concerns, programs and missions. It's also the law.

Though military editorials should present opposing viewpoints for the sake of credibility, they should never attack the command. They should simply acknowledge other viewpoints so they can explain why the command’s position is preferred. Not all commanders are comfortable with this. As a communication adviser, you may need to argue for full and fair treatment of a given issue. At the end of the day, though, your commander dictates your paper’s editorial policies and leanings. That said, withholding bad news to avoid embarrassment is prohibited by Department of Defense Instruction 5120.4, paragraph 4.1.

At civilian news agencies, editorial policies are controlled by an editorial board that typically includes the publisher and the editor-in-chief. Their policies can be expected to reflect their particular interests. By contrast, military editorials give the “why” behind policy, localize national or regional policy, and explain how policy affects service members.

Editorial style emphasizes clarity and brevity over length. Experts recommend a length of no more than 1,000 words per editorial. For your editorial assignment, yours should be four to six pages long when formatted properly for internal stories.

Emotionally charged language loses the reader fast, so don't preach or demand. Speak to the audience with respect. Don’t talk above them, and don’t talk down to them. Addressing the audience as "boys and girls" when you're talking about financial responsibility isn't likely to give the readers a warm and fuzzy.

Stick to a single issue and stick to the point. Don’t get sucked into collateral issues that drown the position. If you are talking about the importance of voting and how it supports our democracy, getting buried in the details of absentee voting will dilute the message.

Be civil. Incivility undermines the position. An editorial can be forceful and enthusiastic without trashing opponents, impugning their intelligence, character, breeding, etc. For example, an article about the importance of wearing seat belts that says people who don't wear seat belts are just stupid, isn't likely to change anyone's opinion and will even turn off those who agree with the writer. An article that is more polite and lists statistics, facts, etc., that support wearing seat belts is going to be much more effective.

Be gracious. Grant people their points by using good counterarguments. This will add to your credibility because it shows you did research and were willing to listen to the other side. Don't issue orders without the horsepower to back them.

Though first-person voice is acceptable in opinion pieces, third-person voice is preferred. For military editorials, limit first-person voice to when the commander is writing.

Your publication may regularly include a multitude of different editorial venues, depending on what your commander wants. The most common among the different types of editorials is the command editorial. If they don’t carry a byline, they are assumed to be from the commanding officer.

Sometimes a staffer or service member from within the command writes an editorial on a position advocated by the commander. This is referred to as a guest editorial and can add credibility to your commander’s position. For example, say your base is suffering from increased DUIs. The boss is livid and wants you to write an editorial, but you already published a command editorial on the subject three weeks ago. This might be a good time to follow up, instead, with the pen of a “subject matter expert,” like a base security officer or maybe the staff judge advocate. Or better yet, someone in the command who was arrested for DUI and can speak to how it affected their lives and the lives of those around them. Guest editorials can also be written by local civilians, prominent or otherwise, and they may be commentaries you’ve spotted in print elsewhere. Be sure to obtain permission before publishing in the command newspaper.

"Suggestion-box" or "complaint-box" journalism has its place and can be an effective tool, if used properly. This brand of editorial venue is called an action line. Whether the input comes in by hard copy letter,
Editorial Policy (continued)

electronically or telephonically, it will be your job to coordinate the answer through the appropriate staff agency or agencies. If your command commits to this approach, it will fall to you to solicit and sometimes create questions.

Cartoons and photographs can also serve as effective editorial content. Pictures are still worth a thousand words, just use good judgment.

Commentaries, too, can be published to influence readers to a certain idea, but they are generally meant to simply entertain. They are an opportunity for your skilled, imaginative writers to exercise their craft. In general, though, don’t have officers or senior enlisted personnel write every commentary that you publish. If the issue affects junior enlisted personnel, have one of your junior writers write the commentary.

They may have already written it and just be waiting for an opportunity to get it published. Remember, though, that commentaries still have to support the command. Like the guest editorial, commentaries can be used to explain unpopular policies and put an end to rumors.

Letters to the editor can be a useful tool for promoting and demonstrating participation throughout the command and, in some newspapers, they’re the perfect forum for people with strong convictions. You will want to consider some policy rules concerning content, appropriateness, length, etc. Civilian newspapers can offer some guidelines which might prove useful for your publication.

We will discuss letters to the editor in more detail later in the course.
Structure

The first element of your editorial is the lead. This is your thesis statement for the article. The lead must grab the attention of the reader, which is why it’s best to use a feature lead.

Directly following the lead, you will state the command’s position. This should be short and clear. The command position is the nutshell paragraph for editorials. It functions as the bridge. Make it easy for the reader to identify.

Next comes the body of the story. Use facts and research to support your thesis. Don’t forget the five W’s and H. The body will contain three counterarguments to your position. The point is to acknowledge that counterarguments exist, not necessarily to argue them. Present the first counter argument, then refute that counter argument with well-researched, fact-based information.

Find credible sources and experts to back up the command position. This inoculates the audience to those counterarguments when they hear them. Then, present the second counter argument and, once again, use good, well-researched information to show your audience that the command position is more valid than this counter argument. Round out the body of your story by repeating this a third time.

When you’ve finished the body of your editorial, follow it up by restating the command position to drive your point home. It can be worded differently, but should be easy for reader to recognize.

Finally, end your editorial with a call to action. The call to action is the conclusion of the editorial. This is why you are writing the article, you want the reader to do something. It has to be something the reader can actually do. The call to action should be short and memorable. Make sure it’s something the writer has the authority to tell readers to do. For example, “Don’t let your fellow soldiers drive drunk” or “Wear your life jacket. You can’t float without it.”
Conclusion

Editorials are very effective tools to help achieve command communication goals. They will need to be one of the tools in your inventory, and you will need to know when to use them and how to use them effectively. This includes potentially ghost writing them for your boss. There are many different kinds of editorial content you might include in your internal information mission. But regardless of the type of editorial content you choose, remember that it must support the command’s position and interests. At the end of the day, editorial content is a tool to better serve your commander’s internal information objectives.
References and Additional Resources


The Hatch Act of 1939, 5 U.S.C.A § 7234