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Writing About the News : EFL Students Express Their Opinions

Michael SCHULMAN*

Introduction

Hard news articles are generally written with a predictable structure. For example, the beginning of most hard news articles is called the lead. It usually includes the ‘who’ and ‘what’ information of the story. ‘When’, ‘where’, and ‘how’ information often follows in the next few sentences, and may be further explored in the remainder of the body of the article. The body of the story may be told in several different styles, including chronological, descending order, and combination. Hard news articles cover news that is considered to be serious and important, and as such should be written in the inverted pyramid style (with the most important information at the beginning of the story), and background information may be provided to help the reader understand the context of the story (Schulman, 2017).

News articles focusing on a reportage of the facts of current events can be used in various ways in the ESL/EFL classroom. For example news consumed at home can be incorporated into warm-up exercises, a “news journal” can be kept for a writing class, or podcasts or radio broadcasts can be used as part of productive listening assignments. Students may also be encouraged in different ways to expand their vocabulary based on news stories. One professor asked students to contribute five or more unfamiliar vocabulary items found in news journalism into a database, on a weekly basis. He then created vocabulary exams including various question types (cloze, multiple choice, write-your-own sentence) based on the database (Moglen, 2014).

In contrast, opinion articles by definition reflect the author’s opinion, rather than a strict rendering of facts. Their structure differs markedly from that of a news article, but is no less complex. ESL/EFL students face particular hurdles in writing an opinion article, for example a lack of expertise due to minimal work experience, and limited English ability. Thus, this paper introduces the OAP (Opinion Article Paragraph), a short paragraph which may be used as a stepping stone toward writing a full length, authentic opinion article. This novel type of

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paragraph is meant to help students write an article that could, with some editing and expansion, actually be published in a standard English-language newspaper. The following literature review is intended to summarize news article-writing strategies enunciated by various leading news organizations or journalists working for them, and the novel OAP structure described in this paper will function as a condensed version of the most common points detailed during this review.

Literature Review

In the view of the BBC's "Bitesize", a website designed for students, there are several tips which an aspiring author may follow to help write an opinion article. It is recommended that the writer start with a "big, bold" statement that will grab the attention of the reader, and then proceed to describe the argument to the reader from the least important to most important point. Short sentences should be used at the start of the article. A topic should be chosen that "annoys" the writer, and will be familiar to the readers. The author should entertain the reader by tackling an "everyday issue" and taking an extreme viewpoint, demonstrate that the issue is important by adapting an appropriate tone, and write a strong finish to the article. The conclusion should seek the reader's "sympathy and understanding" (BBC, 2014).

Stephens (2017), a columnist for the New York Times, provides advice for writers intending to write opinion articles, based on his years of experience in the industry. He feels that the writer must demonstrate that the topic matters and has attracted recent attention. If the topic is not of interest to readers, the article will not be read. In doing this, the writer should avoid using jargon that isn't readily understood by the reader, so that the article may be easily and happily read by an "ordinary subscriber" of the newspaper.

In his view, the article should truly be an opinion piece, not an impartial analysis of the news. In order for the opinion to be persuasive, the writer should have experience or expertise in the topic covered by the article. If not, the reader will perceive that the writer does not have standing in the field. If a younger writer does not have standing in the field, then most of the article should be devoted to providing new information. The author proposes that 80% of the article should cover new information, and 20% opinion. The piece should anticipate and answer the opposing side's strongest argument, in order to help hone this opinion and earn the respect of the reader. (Stephens, 2017).

For example, if a student were writing an opinion article about the need for new campus construction at a private high school, the opposing side's strongest argument might be anticipated and answered by including a paragraph like this :

According to a recent survey conducted by the XYZ Office, 56% of our students oppose new campus construction because they feel it will increase the price of tuition. However, as ABC High recently demonstrated with the public release of records concerning the construction of the ABC Campus Center, it is quite

possible to finance new buildings entirely with the adept use of alumni fundraising.

The Earth Institute of Columbia University has provided a useful, practical guide to writing opinion articles, including a comprehensive list of contacts and guidelines for many newspapers with high levels of circulation in the United States. It also includes pithy and informative tips that may be useful for teachers regarding how a writer might choose an appropriate publication, and thoughts about why opinion pieces are important.

For example, this guide posits that the writer must consider the timing of the piece. It will more likely be published if it covers a subject that has recently been a news item, or if it is in response to a previously published article. In addition, if a problem is discussed in the article, the author should offer a solution. If a solution is not discussed, the article will contain “mere criticism” (I teach this point to my students by giving the example of talking to someone who does nothing but complain. Listeners tend to quickly tune people like that out. It’s far more engaging and productive to take part in a discussion about a problem if potential solutions are then considered, and this applies to opinion articles as well). The article should also have a title that is “catchy” enough to market the article, and quickly make the topic clear to an editor.

The piece should end with a sentence that is powerful or inspires further reflection in the reader. (I teach this by telling the students to “end with a bang”. This is quite different than the end of a hard news article, which is best concluded with the use of something that can be easily cut, like a non-essential quote or background information) (The Earth Institute, 2010).

It is useful to examine the publishing guidelines of publications themselves, as they are the ultimate arbiters of which opinion articles are worthy of publication, and the OAP is meant to be used as a tool for helping students to write authentic articles that may be publishable.

Some newspapers, like the international, widely circulated Financial Times, actively encourage guest writers to submit opinion pieces. This newspaper has published several guidelines that writers who would like to submit opinion articles to the paper should keep in mind.

The Financial Times prefers that submitted pieces make “strong arguments”, and provide a different viewpoint as compared to previously published articles. The topic must match the interests of the readership. As the Financial Times is an international newspaper, a piece on a local issue without much connection to the international community will generate less interest. However, if a local issue can be linked to a global issue, this would be more favored. An example is provided of how farming in a US state might influence the corn prices in an Italian city.

According to this publication, the writer should have expertise in the topic of the article. (Notably, however, the Financial Times does not require that the author has current standing in the field, providing the example of an impoverished architect as a potential writer of a publishable article.) As the writer may be an expert and thus have knowledge unknown to much of the general public, the use of jargon should be avoided, as read-

ers who don't understand what they're reading may be confused or become "put off".

In addition, articles should include examples, for instance making use of quotes or anecdotes, rather than general descriptions. An example is provided of an author who wrote about how a prominent scholarship has changed by discussing her personal experience in applying for it (Masters, 2018).

Finally, the well-known publication *Writer's Digest*, a periodical focused on improving the writing skill and marketability of both novice and professional authors who hope to be published, offers tips by author Susan Shapiro aimed at prospective opinion article writers.

According to Shapiro, the article should be timely, and connected to a topic of current interest. This is particularly important as many news publications now publish online and thus are updated very frequently. The writer should strongly support one viewpoint regarding the topic, rather than blandly presenting various perspectives on an issue. It is helpful if the author is an expert or has personal experience with the subject of the article. Otherwise, it will be difficult to publish.

Facts, statistics, and quotes should be used in the article to help buttress its main argument, however the piece should not be lengthy. Established writers or well-known public figures such as prominent politicians may publish long articles, but a prospective new author should be more concise.

The writer should consider the demographics of the readership, political leanings and tone of the potential publisher of the article. If the piece doesn't seem like a good match for the readership of the publication, it will likely be rejected (Shapiro, 2009).

While the guidelines discussed thus far have come from various sources such as a periodical designed to help writers, a newspaper, and a journalist, there are many points in common which may be incorporated into a compact guide for students learning about the structure of an opinion article. It is helpful to examine excerpts of a well-structured opinion article published in the *New York Times* to see how these tips work in practice.

Despite growing interest in clean energy technology, it looks as if we are not going to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide anytime soon. The amount in the atmosphere today exceeds the most pessimistic forecasts made just a few years ago, and it is increasing faster than anybody had foreseen.

Even if we could stop adding to greenhouse gases tomorrow, the earth would continue warming for decades—and remain hot for centuries. We would still face the threat of water from melting glaciers lapping at our doorsteps.

The beginning of the article makes the author's point of view clear : the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is higher than expected, and increasing. It's an important, serious, and growing problem. It is also portrayed as a current, relevant issue that needs to be addressed.

What can be done? One idea is to counteract warming by tossing small particles into the stratosphere (above where jets fly). This strategy may sound far-fetched, but it has the potential to cool the earth within months.

The author has proposed a solution to the problem, rather than simply offer criticism. In addition, he has defined a word that may not be widely understood, “stratosphere”.

Mount Pinatubo, a volcano in the Philippines that erupted in 1991, showed how it works. The eruption resulted in sulfate particles in the stratosphere that reflected the sun’s rays back to space, and as a consequence the earth briefly cooled.

A historical example has been utilized to demonstrate that the author’s idea is scientifically plausible.

A 1992 report from the National Academy of Sciences suggests that naval artillery, rockets and aircraft exhaust could all be used to send the particles up.

A report from a credible agency has been referred to in order to further explain the main idea.

Seeding the stratosphere might not work perfectly. But it would be cheap and easy enough and is worth investigating.

The author has anticipated a potential counterargument to his proposal (it may not be perfect) and attempted to respond to it (it would be cheap and easy, so it’s worth trying).

Which is the more environmentally sensitive thing to do : let the Greenland ice sheet collapse and polar bears become extinct, or throw a little sulfate in the stratosphere? The second option is at least worth looking into.

The end of the article is strong and inspires further reflection on the part of the reader, as the possibility of the ice sheet collapse and polar bears becoming extinct will likely disturb both animal lovers and people who care about the environment.

Ken Caldeira is a scientist at the Carnegie Institution’s Department of Global Ecology.

The note at the end of the article serves to inform the reader that the author is an expert in the subject matter of the article (Caldeira, 2007).

Study

Guideline

Writing a full-length news or opinion article is a complex task, even for a person writing in one's native language. Aspiring journalists study their craft for years, and of particular relevance to many of our students, even professional scientists who wish to report on their field often seek intensive training in science journalism programs in order to learn how to perform the craft competently. Such programs were developed after journalists and journalism programs recognized there was a need for specialized reporters to cover science and engineering-related news (Wilkes, 2002).

An OAP paragraph should contain several important elements of a standard opinion article, but in shortened form. The review of literature discussing the construction of an opinion article has revealed several common elements which have been incorporated into the framework of an OAP.

Opinion Article Paragraph :

An OAP should have a length of *5 or more sentences*. This will allow the writer to incorporate multiple elements from this list into its construction. It should be focused on subject matter that is either *timely*, or of likely *interest* to the readership (in this case, science/engineering students), in order to generate and maintain reader attention.

The viewpoint in the OAP should be expressed without ambiguity or hedging. The article must not be an impartial discussion but must *strongly take a side*. In doing this, *facts, statistics or quotes* may be used to help support the viewpoint of the writer. Sentences should be *concise, to the point and easy to understand*, and irrelevant information should not be included.

A *personal anecdote* or mention of *personal experience* connected to the subject matter may be used to help support the viewpoint of the writer. However, if the writer is an expert in the field and would like to use specialized knowledge in the article, the *use of jargon* or concepts that will not be widely understood should be avoided, and if such language must be used it should be clearly defined for the reader.

The writer should *propose a solution*, rather than simply express criticism or describe a problem. It is likely, of course, that some will object to the solution, so the writer may *identify and attempt to refute a likely counterargument* to the premise of the OAP.

The conclusion of the OAP should be *expressed strongly and should provoke further reflection*. For example, the writer could pose a provocative question, as in the case of the piece cited earlier in this article.

Assessment

For the purposes of this study a rubric checklist has been constructed to assess the OAP. This rubric includes the most common elements of opinion articles published in major English-language news publications, as identified previously in the literature review. While it is not necessary or practical for every OAP to include every element of the rubric (for example, not all opinion articles will contain a personal anecdote or statistics), including more points generally indicates that the OAP could more easily be converted into a viable full-length opinion article. For example, a short mention in the OAP of a personal connection to the topic could be expanded and explored more comprehensively in a full-length article and become a paragraph. Thus, if the topic were an objection to the decline of organized sports, “I played baseball in high school” in an OAP could become

I played baseball in the ninth grade and experienced firsthand how a team becomes a family. We practiced together, ate together, and even cleaned each others lockers when Coach O’Malley was in the wrong kind of mood. I never did learn how to hit a fastball but when I thought about quitting school it was Coach who got me to stay.

A rubric checklist meant to assist in the assessment of an OAP paragraph should be composed of the following elements :

Table 1. Rubric for Opinion Article Paragraph (OAP) Writing

<i>OBJECTIVE</i>	✓/X
<i>5 or more sentences</i>	
<i>Timely/interesting</i>	
<i>Strongly take a side</i>	
<i>Facts, statistics, quotes</i>	
<i>Concise, to the point, easy to understand</i>	
<i>Personal anecdote/experience</i>	
<i>Avoid the use of jargon</i>	
<i>Propose a solution</i>	
<i>Identify and refute a likely counterargument</i>	
<i>Strong end/provokes further reflection</i>	

Method

Participants

52 OAP paragraphs were produced by 40 1st-4th year undergraduate university students. The students included Biomedical Engineering, Electrical, Electronic and Communications Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Civil and Environmental Engineering, Architecture and Applied Chemistry majors of high beginner-intermediate English ability.

Materials

The OAP paragraphs were composed and compiled as part of the students' "news files" projects. They were instructed both orally and with examples which elements should be included in the paragraphs. Students found their topics as a result of both independent reading and reaction to hard news articles covering a wide variety of subjects, and class discussion. They were instructed that any topic was suitable as long as it were current and of some personal interest, in order to help them produce OAP paragraphs that were passionate and also allow for the possibility that anecdotes or specialized knowledge derived from personal experience relevant to the topic could be included.

Results

The following are samples of student work, arranged in order of increasing rubric score, including examples of feedback (analysis) based on the rubric and constructed with the aim of improving OAP construction. It is hoped that this may be of practical use to teachers taking on OAP or opinion article writing in their classes.

Sample Student OAP 1 :

It's strange for me to know Apple's watch option. But I think that Apple watch will carry society on our's shoulder. Because this product is started to use when it spread widely. Also, I think Apple's idea have several admirable things.

Analysis :

This OAP is clearly much too short and is lacking many of the elements described in the rubric checklist. While there's a mild issue described (the new watch is "strange") and the writer has taken a stand by explaining that it may help society and be "admirable", it does not show that there is a real problem nor suggest a solution to one. It also provides no facts or describes any experiences which elucidate in what ways the watch is strange or how it might be beneficial.

Rubric score : 3 (missing items : 5 or more sentences ; Strongly take a side ; Facts, statistics, quotes ; Personal anecdote/experience ; Propose a solution ; Identify and refute a likely counterargument ; Strong end/provokes further reflection)

Sample Student OAP 2 :

Global warming is one of the most important thing for every living things in the earth. I think that it is caused by human activity. We have responsibility for solving it. If we continue our life, we will not be able to solve the problem. Only one person does any activity for solving it, the person can't change now, so everyone need knowledge about it.

Analysis :

This OAP starts strong, though the clarity of the lead (first sentence) would be improved by substituting the bland word “thing” for a more descriptive word like “problem” or “issue”. The second sentence would be enhanced by using a fact or statistic as evidence. While the OAP strongly takes a side by stating that people “have responsibility” for solving the problem, it does not propose a solution, and as noted earlier this is not preferable in that an opinion article should consist of more than criticism. The final sentence is not easy to understand.

Rubric score : 4 (missing items : Facts, statistics, quotes ; Concise, to the point, easy to understand ; Personal anecdote/experience ; Propose a solution ; Identify and refute a likely counterargument ; Strong end/provokes further reflection)

Sample Student OAP 3 :

I have never take generic drug, because I have never been in the situation that I could choice generic drug. However, if it is as well as original one and cheaper, I will take generic one. On a case in Japan, Japanese love brand name. So I often see the commercial about generic, most of Japanese people may be choice original one.

Analysis :

A strength of this OAP is that it references personal experience. It would be further strengthened if a statistic were used, for example the percentage of people in Japan who choose to use a generic drug vs. the public in other countries. The author does take a side in stating a preference for a generic drug if it were high quality and cost effective, but the argument would be strengthened if it were explained why the reader should care strongly about the issue. Why is it important that generic drugs are made more readily available or consumed with greater frequency than at present? The OAP would be further improved by the proposal of a solution to the problem.

Rubric score : 5 (missing items : 5 or more sentences ; Facts, statistics, quotes ; Propose a solution ; Identify and refute a likely counterargument ; Strong end/provokes further reflection)

Sample Student OAP 4 :

In my life I never saw a tornadoes before but I think it's worst than earthquake or tsunami because the damage is much higher. However I thinks we should have charity for people who got damaged from natural disaster because people who get damage didn't do anything wrong they just have bad luck so we should help them. For example like Unicef helping children, we can collect money to build a home a simple apartment when people lost their home they still have place to survive. I thinks we all in the same world we should help each other's.

Analysis :

This is a well-constructed OAP, meeting many of the objectives on the rubric checklist. While the main idea isn't revealed until the second sentence, it strongly takes a side without any ambiguity. The author writes in the first person and references the fact that UNICEF is an organization that helps people, adding credibility to the assertion that the main idea (a charity should be set up specifically to help people build new homes in the case of natural disasters) is feasible and a good one. The end is strong in that it provokes further reflection.

Rubric score : 8 (missing items : 5 or more sentences ; Identify and refute a likely counterargument)

Sample Student OAP 5 :

I know they face dangers every day and their belief is right. But, some officers or policeman is wrong. For example, a tragedy happened, which is that a white policeman shot an African American who is a nonresistance. It is true that the main issue of this happening may be the race problem, but both them are human and human life is precious. So, I think all officers or policeman must understand that they shouldn't kill all murder.

Analysis :

This OAP has a strong lead that draws the reader in and immediately identifies and refutes a potential counterargument (the point is that police have been too violent, so a strong potential counterargument would be that police face great danger and thus violence is sometimes regrettably unavoidable). An anecdote is provided which further improves the OIP ("a tragedy happened, which is that a white policeman shot an African American" who was not resisting). The OAP suggests still another potential counterargument (the problem lies not with the police, but with the difficulty of race relations in general) and refutation. The end is strong and provokes further reflection by implying that an answer to the problem could lie in the police changing their perspective, but it would be improved by an explicit suggestion of how this could be achieved (for example, a novel

education program, series of workshops etc.) This is a well-constructed OAP that could be easily converted into a full-length opinion article.

Rubric score : 9 (missing items : Personal anecdote/experience)

As a result of this study, students were able to produce OAP paragraphs that included numerous items listed in the rubric checklist. While these are not full-length articles, they contain many of the core components of authentic opinion articles which appear in English-language newspapers. Future research related to this study could include analysis of full-length opinion articles based on prior OAP construction, in order to test the OAP's effectiveness as a stepping stone to a well-constructed, authentic article.

Conclusion

This study attempts to aid in writing an authentic opinion article by proposing a novel type of paragraph meant to be utilized by ESL/EFL students who are tasked with learning how to write this type of article : the OAP, or Opinion Article Paragraph. A checklist rubric is provided to help guide and assess the OAP to confirm that it is composed of elements which would allow it to be converted into a well-constructed full-length opinion article, and student work is analyzed with the use of this rubric. Teachers who may be interested in helping ESL/EFL students to write an opinion article may wish to utilize the OAP paragraph as part of their instruction. For example, students could read samples of published, well-constructed opinion articles, learn the elements of an opinion article and see how they are utilized in these articles in detail (as demonstrated in the discussion of Caldeira's article earlier in this paper), construct several of their own OAP paragraphs using the rubric as a guide, and then write a full-length article based on an OAP as a final project.

The study is limited by the current knowledge of the students, in that none are yet working and thus most do not have firsthand experience in the fields they are writing about, and this may make it more difficult to form and expand an opinion persuasive enough to drive an effective and compelling OAP or full-length opinion article. Another limitation is the English ability of the students. Some were not proficient at constructing a paragraph of any type, so before learning about what was expected in an OAP they required preliminary instruction in basic paragraph composition.

Many students are not regular newspaper readers. Students with no previous experience reading opinion articles thus had the need to acquire a basic understanding of the differences between news writing and opinion article writing. In addition, a full-length opinion article based on an OAP paragraph was not assigned, so its effectiveness as a stepping stone to a well-constructed, authentic article has yet to be tested and is thus another limitation of this study.

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【Abstract】

ニュースについて書く：EFLの学生が意見を発表

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新聞やニュース関係のウェブサイトに掲載される論説や意見記事は書き手の意見を伝える有効な手段であり、グローバル化が進みインターネットが普及した現在において、世界中の人々のものの見方や考え方を知る手がかりとなる。本文は、論説の書き方に関する既存の文献を紹介し、容易とは言えない本格的な論説を書くための最初のステップとして、新しいタイプのパラグラフである論説パラグラフ（OAP/Opinion Article Paragraph）を書くための枠組みをEFLの学生に示すものである。学生の提出物はチェックリストを用いて評価され、さらにリサーチすべき分野が示される。

キーワード：論説、社説、ESL/EFL、ニュースパラグラフ、新聞記事を書くこと

Opinion articles published in newspapers as well as various news-related websites are an effective means for people to air their views, and an important way in this age of globalization and the World Wide Web to help people understand the perspective of others worldwide. This paper will review previous literature related to the construction of an opinion article, and establish a framework for EFL students to produce a novel type of paragraph, an OAP (Opinion Article Paragraph), meant as a first step in helping them to produce a full version of this challenging type of writing. Student work is evaluated using a checklist rubric, and areas for further research are suggested.

Key words : opinion article, editorial, ESL/EFL, news paragraph, newspaper article writing

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