

OP ED: A Tool and Tactic to Inspire Creative Writing Skills

Arab-speaking students, enrolled in undergraduate programs where English is the language of instruction, frequently express anxiety regarding scholarly writing assignments.

The opinion editorial (OP ED) provides an opportunity for students to focus attention on a topic of interest, express a viewpoint about a controversial issue, build a persuasive argument and communicate their thoughts to a target audience. The simple format of the OP ED (introduction, body, conclusion), combined with its brevity (500-700 words), offers a great starting point for novice writers. Besides feeling less overwhelmed in tackling a 2-3 page paper as opposed to a 5-10 page essay, students experience a sense of pride and confidence when they see their ideas in print and realize their opinions matter. The OP ED offers the chance for students to develop skills in idea expression, mount a logical, convincing, coherent argument and present their opinion in an organized, professional manner.

After refreshing my own skills in OP ED writing through a 9-hour course offered by the advanced writing centre at the College of North Atlantic in Qatar (CNA-Q), I embarked on transferring this learning to diploma –prepared nurses enrolled in the baccalaureate degree program at University of Calgary in Qatar (UC-Q). Following the procedure utilized by the CNA-Q facilitator, I provided students with guided instruction using a sequential, staged approach. A template was distributed outlining the step-by-step procedures for crafting an OP ED. Sample OP EDs from popular press and scholarly journals were presented as exemplars. Group and individual tutorials were offered, as requested, over a 3-week period. Students were assisted to access, review and integrate relevant evidence to support to their opinion-based thinking. They were encouraged to submit a draft OP ED for my review and feedback prior to the deadline submission date. The feedback process focused on offering suggestions to condense content, strengthen arguments, and improve the clarity or specificity of expressed ideas.

I observed dramatic improvement in students' OP EDs from initial to final versions. Some are publishable and will be submitted to editorial columns of local or international journals. I believe the "hands-on" supportive coaching (preceded by preliminary tips and guidelines), combined with constructive feedback and persevering practice increased students' skills, confidence and ultimately the quality of their OP ED. Overall, students described the learning experience as positive, albeit challenging. The exercise enabled them to realize the power and potential of creative writing, while sensitizing them to the possibilities for using their "voice" to share their views and increase public awareness about the profession of nursing.

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