



DON'T BE FOOLED BY... THE OP-ED PAGES

"All the news that's fit to print," proclaims the banner of the *New York Times*. But news isn't the only thing you'll find in what readers fondly refer to as "the old gray lady." Some of the most informative, entertaining, and, frequently, infuriating "news" printed in the *New York Times*—and most other newspapers today—can be found in the op-ed pages, where opinion pieces, editorials, and letters to the editor reign supreme. Often the last two inside pages of the first section, the op-ed pages need to be read differently from the rest of the paper. Writers of the standard news pages try to be objective, and while their values and beliefs may sneak in, they attempt to minimize the influence of their opinions on their work.

Writers on the op-ed pages, in contrast, flaunt their opinions, proudly display their biases, and make value-laden claims with abandon. This can make for fascinating reading, and can help you to formulate your own opinions, if you know what you are reading. Op-ed writers include

- **The newspaper's editorial board**—editors employed by the paper who take stands on public matters, recommend courses of action to officials, and endorse candidates for office. On the whole, editorial boards are more conservative than liberal (for example, they have endorsed Republican presidential candidates far more often than they have endorsed Democrats)—but they often reflect the ideological tendencies of their reader base. The editors of the *New York Times*, which is read by a liberal urban population, take stances that are on the more liberal side, while the *Wall Street Journal*, subscribed to by the national business community, is more conservative. *USA Today*, which aspires to a broad national circulation, attempts to be more moderate in its outlook.
- **Columnists**—writers employed by the paper or by a news syndicate (whose work is distributed to many newspapers) who analyze current events from their personal ideological point of view. Columnists can be liberal, like the *Washington Post*'s E. J. Dionne, or the *New York Times*'s Nicholas Kristof, or conservative, like David Brooks and Ross Douthat (*New York Times*), and George Will (*Washington Post*). Maureen Dowd and Tom Friedman, both of the *New York Times*, are cogent observers and critics of the political scene who defy precise placement on an ideological scale. While their values tend toward the liberal, they are equally hard on both parties.

- **Guest columnists**—ranging from the country's elite in the *New York Times* to everyday Americans in *USA Today*—who expound their views on a wide range of issues.
- **Readers of the newspaper**—who write letters to the editor, responding either to points of news coverage in the newspaper or to other items on the op-ed pages.

What to Watch Out For

- **Who is the author?** What do you know about him or her? As you get used to reading certain newspaper editorial pages and columnists you will know what to expect from them. Guest columnists are harder to gauge. The paper should tell you who they are, but you can always do further research on the web or elsewhere. Figure out how the author's job or achievements might influence his or her views.
- **What are the values underlying the piece you are reading?** Does the author make his or her values clear? If not, can you figure them out based on what the person writes? Unless you know the values that motivate an author, it is difficult to judge fairly what he or she has to say, and it can be difficult not to be hoodwinked as well.
- **Is the author building an argument?** If so, are the premises or assumptions that the author makes clear? Does the author cite adequate evidence to back up his or her points? Does the argument make sense? Notice that these are versions of the same questions we set out as guides to critical thinking in Chapter 1. Always think critically when you are reading an op-ed piece, or you are in danger of taking someone's opinions and preferences as fact!
- **What kinds of literary devices does the author use that you might not find in a straight news story?** Opinion writers, especially columnists, might use sarcasm or irony to expose what they see as the absurdities of politics or political figures, and they might even invent fictional characters. What is the point of these literary devices? Are they effective?
- **Has the author persuaded you?** Why or why not? Has the author shown you how to look at a familiar situation in a new light, or has he or she merely reinforced your own opinions? Do you feel inspired to write a letter to the editor on the subject? If so, do it!