

*Out of the Tower and Into the Fire:
Op-Ed Tip Sheet for Academics and Other Contemplative Creatures*

Dalton Conley

1. **Use Your Public Affairs Office** (if your institution has one): They have contacts that you don't. Find out the person who is assigned to your department/school and invite him/her to coffee to discuss your work, expertise, interests, and so on. They can write that you are the greatest expert on wheat since the person who invented sliced bread when submitting a piece on your behalf—while you shouldn't toot your own horn, so to speak.
2. **Be a First Responder**: When a reporter calls or emails or when you get a query from the public affairs office, respond *immediately*. Even if you have no expertise on the subject, a quick Google search of your faculty colleagues may show who does at your institution. Even if there is nobody at your institution who works on the social history of sandals (something I was asked about once), don't leave the reporter empty-handed. The better your relationships with journalists, the more likely it is that your pieces will be read and considered seriously. While a reporter on the metro desk obviously does not work on the Op-Ed page, s/he may be able to forward a piece that you write to the right person once you have established yourself as a regular resource for that person.
3. **Don't Give them Two Chances to Turn You Down**: Some folks recommend queries so you "don't waste your time" if you they aren't interested. But if you are committed enough to write a piece, then just pen the darn thing. If the place you were hoping would take it doesn't, you can try somewhere else. Also, if you can't place it by the time that peg has "expired," don't just post it on your blog; decapitate it (i.e. cut off the lead sentence / peg) and store it cryogenically on your hard-drive.
4. **Don't Move in Academic Time**: To avoid the cryogenic fate for your efforts, be quick when you are submitting pieces pegged to a certain issue. You don't have time to let ideas stew and go for peer review. You don't even have time to take a long run or bubble bath to think. Imagine you are back in school and you have a one-hour in-class exam (*not* a take-home essay). If you are pegging to a news event, you have maybe a few hours, perhaps a day, in rare cases longer to get your piece to the editor.
5. **Don't Pitch Too Hard or Too Often**: You want your submissions to be read. Just like anyone else—and even more so—editors don't want to be bothered frequently. Most places won't print a piece from the same author more than once every three months or so, and even if you haven't been in their pages for a long time, you shouldn't try them with new pieces more than once every couple months at most. If you are writing to a particular individual with whom you have

a relationship, you can perhaps ask for confirmation that they received your pitch. Otherwise, assume they did. If you haven't heard back in a few days, it is safe to assume that they won't be calling you. However, if you have sent your piece to a particular person (rather than just to oped@mynewspaper.com), then before you send it somewhere else, you should dash off another email that says something like, "I am assuming that you are passing on the piece "The Hidden Causes of School Shootings" that I emailed you on August 1st (attached again below). If that's not correct, and you just have not had time to take a look, please let me know. Either way, thanks a lot for your consideration of my work." If instead, you just sent to the slush pile—i.e. the general Op-Ed email address—then you can just assume they have passed after about ten days or to be safe you can just send a quick two-liner stating that you are withdrawing it from consideration. The good news is that in the information age there plenty of decent outlets for your work if you get turned down by the first couple (or fifty) places you pitch. That remains true even as many newspapers are folding.

This plethora of outlets makes it tempting to submit an essay to more than one place at a time. Stop! Never, ever do this—even if the pieces are slightly different takes. If they are at all on the same topic or rely on the same peg, you are asking for a disaster. Yes, it may feel great to be on the opinion pages of both the *L.A. Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* on the same day, but you will be persona non-grata in the commentariat forever.

6. **Be Imaginative with Your Peg:** Sometimes pegging something to the biggest news—whether that's 9/11 or the death of Michael Jackson—lowers your chances of success, counter-intuitively. That's because the market for MJ pieces is saturated with everyone, and unless you yourself spent a weekend in Neverland taking prescription drugs with the King of Pop, then you probably will want to peg your essay on narcotics regulations to something else (though there is no harm in trying). A peg can be anything: a holiday, an anniversary, an obscure news event, a line buried deep in a law about to be (or just) passed by Congress.

By way of example, think about how many things we can peg to Thanksgiving: factor farming (of turkeys); travel; transportation issues; Native Americans; colonialism; family dynamics; obesity; gratitude; and many more, I am sure. Historical anniversaries also make nice, mellow pegs. I am writing this on August 10th. A quick look online tells me that on August 10th, the Smithsonian Institution was founded—which itself makes a nice peg for public understanding of science or history; for museums more generally; for public financing; for non-school educational institutions; and so on. If you chose to use a soft pegs, submit your piece well in advance (a month or two), since editors don't leave their Christmas Op-Eds till Santa is already airborne. I once placed a Labor Day Op-Ed in June, for example.

7. **Read a Publication Before You Write for It:** Each outlet has its own rules and style. For example, some newspapers don't let you write on your own research.

Others never deploy a certain style or eschew others. Some have special “series” like the *New York Times*’ “Summerscapes.” Also read (or search) that publication to make sure they have not recently run a piece on the same topic.

8. **Don’t Be Hung Up on the Big Dailies:** Just because the *New York Times* doesn’t take your piece, all hope is not lost for you to influence (or create) an important public debate. Specialty publications are often read by elites in particular fields. If you are writing about philanthropy, the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* is surely going to be read by major foundation presidents. Ditto for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and education wonks, college presidents and AAUP officials. *The New Republic* online and the *Washington Monthly* are read by national policy makers to an extent belied by their overall circulation numbers. The dailies in the state capitals are read by legislative staffs and the executive branch. Trade magazines are read by industry insiders. You get the picture.
9. **What’s the Password, Kenneth?:** Ok, so you are ready to write your piece in an hour. Set the timer. Now go. Here’s the formula. First of all, you can’t write more than 750 words. OK, 800 tops.

The first graph has four or five lines. The first line mentions the peg. The second line sets up the “fight.” The third line intimates the argument—that you know something these other folks don’t. And the fourth line previews your recommendation based on your secret knowledge. By way of example, let’s imagine (and I am imagining since I know nothing about this area) an Op-Ed written in response to the Virginia Tech shooting:

“Perhaps we will never know why Seung-hui Cho killed 32 people last week at Virginia Tech. Most explanations for why the U.S. experiences more needless bloodshed on its campuses, as compared to other countries, have focused on either individual characteristics, such as the mental health of the shooter, whether or not he was bullied and so on, or on societal-level accounts, like our gun culture and the power of the NRA. But there is another factor that falls in between these personal and political planes: the social organization of college campuses. Namely, we are unique in the world with respect to the extent to which we segregate and isolate university students from the rest of society. Unless we reorganize the way we school our young adults, such nightmares will continue to plague our country.”

The next three or so paragraphs then start fresh and explain the background of the problem; tip your hat at the opposition; and lead the reader through your counter-intuitive, yet brilliant, logic. So the next paragraph might start with some statistics to support your claim:

“In the United States, only X percent of four year college students commute from home; this figure is one-fourth the world average. Why

does it matter where college attendees live? Because students living on campus live in an artificial social bubble where their ties to other supportive networks—family, work, church and so on—are cut-off. American residential colleges, in fact, share many characteristics with prisons and mental hospitals. They are what the sociologist Erving Goffman called “total institutions.” A total institution is characterized by the fact that...

You’ll perhaps go through the history of how American colleges ended up fairly unique in this regard, what the research shows about the effects of total institutions generally, what the statistics illustrate about how commuter campuses don’t experience shootings to the extent that residential colleges do. (Again, *I repeat*, I have no expertise on this issue, so what I am claiming here could be completely backwards as far as I know.)

Then in the penultimate graph, you need to inoculate yourself against your enemies (and believe me, any Op-Ed worth reading will garner you enemies, no matter how obscure the issue may appear).

“Of course, the institutional character of college campuses is but one of many factors affecting the outbreak of violence. And there are, obviously, many wonderful aspects of residential colleges. For example, in surveys where folks are asked to list their closest friends, most Americans who have lived on campus list their co-educationals among their longest and dearest BFFs. Likewise, the middle ground of college living—unsupervised by parents but in an environment protected from the stresses and responsibilities of full adulthood—is an important developmental phase for many adolescents...”

In the final paragraph, you will come back to your argument and get a bit more specific about your recommendation. Perhaps you also will acknowledge that it is unrealistic to totally reorganize college living, so that something on the margins, like protected time to see family or the expansion of on-campus visitor housing (so that family can come more often) is a middle ground solution. And then, you will circle back to the specific peg about Virginia Tech with some wise line at the very end about anything being worth the cost if it can avoid another 32 senseless deaths in the future.

That’s the formula. Once you get really good at the formula, you can deviate from it. When an editor knows you really well and trusts that your stuff is almost invariably good, then you can pitch a 1,200 word piece. When you have placed a half-dozen pieces that are pegged to something timely, then you can try floating an essay with no peg whatsoever. When your argumentation has gotten so tight and flawless that the late William F. Buckley himself would cry uncle if you were to read it to him on *Firing Line*, then you can try a literary thought piece that

reflects on your childhood at Walden Pond. But for now, stick to the formula, Kenneth.

10. **Write for Your Kid Brother:** You are home explaining your work, your argument, ten years of research you conducted six days a week for twelve hours a day. You are explaining it to your grandmother who is hard of hearing. To your bratty 12 year old nephew. Or to your new sister-in-law from Moldova who is visiting America for the first time. Now you are in the right mindset. No jargon. And by jargon, I don't just mean "intertextuality," "postmodern," "logistic regression," or "hyper-methylation of CpG sequences." I even mean terms like "correlation" (replace with "relationship between"); "holding constant" or "net of" (try: "when we statistically compare individuals who have the same education"); "agency" (how about "power"?); or even "social structure" (c.f. "invisible forces").
11. **Read it Aloud (to your Kid Brother):** Prose of any sort has its own rhythm, harmony and melody. Only by reading things aloud will you hear how it sounds. Do you repeat a word too soon? Is there an accidental rhyming that you want to avoid? Is this explanation of a technical concept unclear? It will all come into focus when you read aloud—particularly, if you read aloud to someone else. My colleague Brooke Kroeger says that when you read your piece to someone else, it's like bringing home your new boy/girlfriend to meet your family. Suddenly you are viewing it through the eyes of the other. (In the case of the girlfriend, you are seeing the flaws of your family through her eyes and her short-comings through theirs; luckily with your essays you don't have to do double duty.)
12. **Don't Forget Your 7th Grade Grammar Lessons:** Data is plural. Datum is singular. Use "that" instead of "which" most of the time, unless "which" is preceded by a comma to ghettoize a truly subordinate phrase from the rest of the sentence. "To whom," not "to who." If you are not sure between "he and I" and "him and me" just take out the he/him and see how it sounds. And don't end your sentences with a preposition unless to not do so would involve enormous contortions for which you would look silly. While I am all for a living, breathing English language that evolves—over a rarefied, stilted one—we are faculty and do have some standards to uphold (after all, who else will)? Okay, maybe I am just getting old and stodgy, but part of keeping a language alive is remembering the "correct" way it was once written/spoken. This task falls upon our shoulders. That said, keep your sentences short. This is America. Not France. This is the 21st Century, not the age of Henry James. (And please excuse me for all the grammatical errors, split infinitives and other mistakes in this document. I am just a social scientist, after all.)
13. **Reality Check:** You may think that in an Op-Ed—unlike your journal articles—you can get away with being loose and easy with your facts and claims because there is no peer review. Think again. A good publication will ask you for sources for almost every sentence that you pen. Have them ready so that you are not

struggling to get online at the airport as your flight to Aruba is about to leave – after all, chances are this is when they *will* call and tell you that your piece they have been holding for two months is now scheduled for *tomorrow*! And check everything again yourself. You are about to be peer-reviewed by thousands, potentially millions, of eyeballs. The last thing you want to do is have the editors have to print a retraction or correction. That certainly helps your chances of getting a piece placed next time—NOT! It’s equally embarrassing to the editor who was assigned to your piece, and you don’t want to create negative associations with your name in his/her mind.

14. **Was it Good for You? (What to Prepare for Post-Publication):**

Congratulations, you are now a member of the commentariat, and you will receive your permanent membership card in about six to eight weeks in the mail. In the meantime, here are some post-publication words to the wise:

Don’t send mass emails with your piece to everyone in your email inbox or your Facebook network. Hold your chin high and act as though your name on the opinion pages will become so commonplace soon enough that there is no need to trumpet your accomplishment. Of course, if there are key individuals whom you want to make sure see it—like a Congressional staff member, the dean who is deciding on your tenure case that very moment, or your grandmother who wanted you to become a *real* doctor— by all means send it on (never mind that on is a preposition, by adding this parenthetical clause, I am sort of safe). Next, head for the tanning salon to thicken your skin. That is, don’t pull a Sarah Palin and freak out when folks start making stuff up about your daughter’s pregnancy or start claiming you were born in Kenya and not Hawaii. Remember the old adage: Be careful what you wish for (or, rather, “for what you wish”)...

Also, make a policy about how you are going to engage with the feedback you receive. You could, for example, only answer positive emails you receive. You could make a point of answering all mail. You could respond to on line bloggers and comments. My personal approach is to try—to the extent possible—to answer anyone who writes me directly via e-mail or snail mail, whether positive or negative. I never, however, respond to comments made on list-serves, blogs, or in the comments threads on-line. That’s just my personal preference. I feel like the on-line back-and-forth is a vortex that could suck away all my time and attention. (See note about Sarah Palin above.)

Do not worry about re-using topics. There are many pieces I have written on the black-white wealth gap. Don’t, however, re-use the same text. Nor should you pitch the same place—even years later—on the same topic. All the same, it is perfectly legitimate to alter your argument, make a slightly different point, present new data (or a new datum), peg to a different event and write about the same issues for a novel media outlet. Heck, there are folks holed up in think tanks who send out piece after piece hammering the same issue over and over again and get

big salaries from rich patrons for doing so. They don't have undergraduates to teach, of course, so they have more time.

Lastly, don't despair when your piece does not rock the world. The path from the planet of ideas to the world of actual change is a long and winding one, filled with asteroids and other dangerous obstacles. As far as I had known, the record-holder for speed in turning an intellectual idea into a law is Charles Murray, whose 1984 book, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980* (and associated Op-Eds), made the most prominent case that welfare was the cause of a number of social ills. A dozen years later, Clinton signed the Personal Work, Responsibility, and Opportunity Reconciliation Act into law, thereby ending "welfare as we knew it." Of course, Murray was neither the first nor the last advocate of welfare reform, only the most eloquent. Meanwhile, he had moved onto other projects. As it turns out, Murray was merely the silver medal winner. The gold goes to political scientists Richard Cloward and Frances Piven, who argued for reforms to make voter registration easier in the late 1980s, which (not that) led to the passage of what came to be known as the Motor-Voter law by Bill Clinton in 1993. But we should note that they worked their butts off as community organizers, fundraisers, and all-around advocates to get that bill through Congress and onto the President's desk. So maybe they shouldn't count; it's kind of like an Op-Ed on steroids.

There are, however, a couple pointers to getting your ideas to grow legs. First, the less you care about getting credit for change, the easier it is to effect. The simplest example is that you want to influence the voting on a piece of legislation that is hanging by a thread in your state legislature. Rather than writing a piece yourself, you might team up with your local state senator and become her ghost writer. An opinion piece written by a key lawmaker will have more impact than one written by Professor Jane Smith. Of course, the rub is that nobody will ever know you've written it (except your grandmother who wanted you to become a M.D., and she won't believe you). You will also notice that when you write a piece about a topic—no matter how seemingly arcane—there is probably already an activist community laying in wait, ready to spring into action (for and against your proposal). Be prepared. Once you write something, you now work for it, and as such, you have an obligation to engage further (at least in my opinion).

Happy pontificating!

Alas, I have learned each of these lessons the hard way, so you don't have to! For more (and perhaps better) tips, try Professor Andrew Leigh's recommendations that (not which) can be found here: http://econrsss.anu.edu.au/~aleigh/pdf/OpEd_Tips.pdf