

Unit Introduction



Editorial

As a Public Affairs Officer, you will be asked to write editorials for internal and external audiences. As a valued member of the commander's staff, the boss will expect that you can write an informed commentary for his by-line.

In addition to writing editorials that strike a nerve, your other motivation in taking a keen interest in crafting editorials is "stayin' alive" -- not getting fired -- every publication day, when your paper hits the streets.

Why? Because writing and running editorials offers lots of potential, both good and bad.

- **Good** -- It gives you the opportunity to explain the commander's position on a range of issues important to your base.
- **Bad** -- Is misdirected or offensive and if you allow yourself or others to get on the proverbial soapbox, you will create a minefield and could lose your job.

Unit Objective

- Write an editorial

Unit Overview

- **What editorials are and how they are used**

- Definition
- Categories
- Purpose
- Policy/appropriate style
- Editorial forums

- **Structure**

- Lead
- Bridge
- Body
- The call to action (conclusion)

Definition: What is an editorial?

First, there's Webster's definition, understanding its background dates 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. In colonial days, the editorial stated the views of those in control. With the Constitution and the First Amendment, the editorial became the heart and soul of the American newspaper.

A more modern definition presents the editorial like an argument in a court case. The editorial **presents evidence**, hopefully **proves its point with sound logic**, and then **convinces its audience and the public that the position is correct**. The editorial also **moves the audience toward the position**.

In a military publication, an editorial has value for both the command and the individual readers:

It gives the commander a chance to present policies, using every timely opportunity that arises to present arguments.

It gives readers expert interpretations on issues/events. The average reader doesn't have the time or, sometimes, the ability to unravel all the complexities of a given issue/event. He relies on the editorial writer to do the research and tell him why the issue/event is worth consideration.

Categories of editorials

Most military editorials fall into two general categories: the issue editorial and the broad theme editorial.

- **Issue editorials** usually have news pegs -- topics that are closely related to current events/the news. They must be meaningful to readers, such as poor operational security at the unit, trash in housing areas, drinking and driving problems, etc. The challenge with issue editorials is to prevent the commander from "harping" on an issue that's been heard before and to make it relevant and meaningful. Otherwise, readers will say, "Here we go again!"

[Example: Issue editorial](#)

- **Broad theme editorials** may be harder to write because they deal with beliefs and attitudes that are large in scope. Often, military papers will address areas unique to servicemembers, such as our traditions, customs and courtesies, core values ... why we have retreat ceremonies, wearing the uniform properly, saluting, Veterans Day and Memorial Day, etc.

[Example: Broad theme editorial](#)

Purposes of editorials

Editorials can:

- Inform, explain, give background information on a new policy or regulation, tell what it's all about, or applaud achievement. They are especially useful for explaining seemingly unpopular command decisions and can help put the news or policy change into perspective
- Entertain by expressing particular points, using humor, satire, dialogue, puns or anecdotes. This provides a change of pace for the paper, but don't get carried away. If the reader decides your writing is more entertainment than serious thought, you've overdone it. P
- Provide information to help influence readers to another point of view. They recognize and define problems, suggest and test solutions, offer arguments and rebuttals, and call for support

Regardless of what purpose you have in mind for your editorial, it must have considered all opinions, be logical, and contain researched, solid arguments.

Editorial policy

Editorials in military publications address military concerns, programs and missions.

Taking sides and pushing political agendas are as old as America itself. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson did it. But while the local civilian newspaper may endorse a presidential candidate, your military publication cannot.

Your military publication also cannot attack the command about how it's doing things. Editorials in military publications are not your personal soapbox (or anyone else's, for that matter), unless you want to get fired.

An editorial in a military publication must present all sides of an issue, including opposing viewpoints. This is important for credibility -- acknowledge the opposing viewpoint, then show why the command's position is to be preferred. Not all commanders are comfortable with this. They want to see only the "party line" in "their" papers. As a communications adviser, you need to make the argument when appropriate for full and fair treatment of a given issue.

Lastly, an editorial in a military publication must conclude with a positive call to action.

Editorial policy

How can you convince a reluctant commander to include editorials in the unit newspaper?

Much will depend on the relationship and trust level you have achieved with him or her. If he or she trusts you to make the right decisions, it will make convincing him or her easier.

You can explain why/how editorial content is important to both the command and the readers. You can provide the appropriate service regulation on editorial content and make sure it is also included in the editorial policy for your publication. You can research and present the successes of other unit editorial pages to show how they can be an effective communication tool at your unit.

But despite how convincing your arguments are, it's important to remember that in the end, it is the commander's newspaper. He or she makes the final determination of what will or will not be published, not you.

Policy sources

For a civilian newspaper, policy comes from an editorial board, whose members include the publisher and editor in chief. Its policies reflect the board's interests.

But for a military newspaper, policy is set by the commander and is in the interest of the command.

The editorial policy supports the command mission and internal information objectives. The editorial board could consist of the commander, the public affairs officer and the editors; these people should create an individual policy letter.

Policy letters

It's important to have an **editorial policy letter** for your publication in writing and endorsed by the commanding officer. Why?

The editorial policy letter supports you when you're dealing with "customers" who are displeased with the content of the publication.

It provides a set of rules, such as deadlines, that the entire newspaper staff can refer to, even when personnel turnovers occur, and designates the review process of publication material.

A policy letter establishes photography requirements and restrictions and guides "guest writers" with guidelines they must follow if they wish their input to be considered for publication.

Basically, a command-endorsed editorial policy letter is a good thing to have on hand whenever someone questions you about the newspaper operating procedure and/or its content.

Air Force Instruction 35-101 (included on your CD reference) contains a good example of an editorial policy letter. If you don't already have one, it's time to draw one up and get the commander's buy-in!

Editorial style

Selecting an appropriate topic is only part of the equation. The style in which you present the information is extremely important if you are to reach readers and produce the desired response.

Emphasize clarity and brevity. Experts recommend a length of approximately 1,000 words per editorial. *Your editorial for this assignment should be between four and six pages in length, when formatted properly for internal stories.*

Emotionally charged language loses readers fast. Remember, editorials are not personal soapboxes.

Don't preach or demand by using expressions such as "in our opinion," "as we see it," or "we demand that." A pure editorial is anonymous in style. Personal pronouns such as "I" and "we" are usually inappropriate in a command editorial, unless it is a commander's column.

Stick to a single issue, and stick to the point. Don't get sucked into collateral issues.

Editorial style

Don't issue orders without the horsepower to back them. It's OK for the commander to do this, but the PAO isn't the boss.

"Speak" to the audience with respect. An editorial can be forceful and enthusiastic without trashing opponents, impugning their intelligence, character, breeding, etc. Grant people their points by using good counter-arguments. This will add to your credibility because it shows you did your research and were willing to listen to the other side.

Use humor carefully. It can come across as immature or offensive when overdone.

To illustrate the final two points, read this example: [Arctic Star article](#)

Things to note in the article:

-The sophomoric humor turns many readers off by the the fourth paragraph, well before the author gets to the point in the seventh paragraph by introducing the concern of Veterinary Services.

- In the sixth paragraph, the author insults readers who disagree with the position being presented.

Editorial forums

Your publication may include some, all or none of these elements on a regular basis. It depends on what your commander wants.

- **Command editorials:** If they don't carry a by-line, they are assumed to be from the commanding officer. You will write them, but your readers will believe the commander did. This is called "Ghost Writing." Your editorials should have the commander's endorsement.
- **Guest editorials:** This is when another staff or servicemember writes an editorial on a position advocated by the commander. This may be highly beneficial when you want to 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 for her. But say the boss just had an editorial on the subject three months ago. Rather than have the boss get on the band wagon again, why not see if you can get a subject matter expert to write the editorial? JAG? Provost marshal? Hospital commander? A servicemember who recently had a DUI and almost his life and career.
- **Action lines:** When people call or write to your office with a complaint or problem, sometimes it's best to "farm out" the issue to a subject matter expert for a response. The commander will probably pick a couple of these issues that affect the command to run in each issue of the paper. Action lines can be extremely effective in answering questions many readers may share, but they can be time-consuming; you're pretty dependant on the schedules of the SMEs you're relying on for answers.

Editorial forums

- **Letters to the editor:** These can be dangerous. If a letter slams command policy, run it by the commander and get his reaction. And once you start running letters, it may become difficult to edit and restrict content and messages. Letters to civilian newspapers can also be a useful tool, but they must be weighed carefully.

Example: [Bad response to a letter to the editor](#)

Things to note: Ms. Harvey may be a "regular customer" and an annoyance, but there's one at every base. And she asks some valid questions that open a door for PAOs. Capt. Peterson's response may get a "HOO-ah" from the internal audience, but they shouldn't have been the target. The civilians who could have heard good messages about their legitimate noise concerns instead now have an impression of the Marine Corps as a bunch of smart-mouthed punks. Peterson makes good points about how often we're deployed, etc., but the message won't resonate because of the haughty tone he used.

Example: [Good response to a letter to the editor](#)

Things to note: See how a respectful response can make all the difference? Lt. Col. Pleus' response to the letter answered the question factually and respectfully, without responding in a negative manner to Mr. MacRae's sarcastic tone. As you can see from Mr. MacRae's followup letter and the additional comments, this response did resonate well within the community.

Editorial forums

- **Commentaries:** These can be used purely for entertainment purposes or to help interpret command policies, but in a slightly different way than editorials. One big difference between an editorial and a commentary is that a commentary contains the personal opinions of the writer. It also doesn't always contain a call to action. A commentary should always include the writer's name and unit; don't run one if it doesn't. Occasionally, double-check with the unit listed to see if the writer is really who he says he is. Commentaries must support the command, or they have no place in the command newspaper. Like the guest editorial, commentaries can be a good tool to squelch rumors and stop rampant griping when they are seen as being written by a credible peer. For example, don't have all commentaries written by an officer or senior enlisted member; if the issue affects liberty policies for E3s and below, let an E3 write a commentary supporting the new policy.

[Example: military commentary](#)

[Example: Dave Barry commentary](#) (just for fun!)

Dave Barry is a humor columnist whose work has appeared in more than 500 newspapers around the world. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Commentary in 1988.

The editorial lead

Just like the lead of a feature story, the editorial lead must be attractive and draw the reader into the editorial. The editorial lead must give the reader a reason to read something that isn't hard-hitting news (at least, not most of the time).

Try different approaches. If the subject is related to current news, a kind of summary lead may be effective. If it's a subject that's coming "out of the blue," a feature lead such as a teaser or a narrative may be more effective in gaining interest.

The editorial bridge/nut 'graph

As with the nut 'graph in the feature, state the point -- **the command's position** -- within the first few paragraphs. Don't make the reader wait too long or have to figure it out on her own.

The editorial body

The body is where the real "grunt work" of the editorial is accomplished.

- The body must relate the facts of the problem in detail and develop supporting arguments. It must present **counter-arguments** (reasons why opponents of the command position dispute the idea/policy) fairly and, for each one, provide a **refute** that uses facts and research to show why the idea/policy is preferable to the arguments against it. *For DINFOS editorials, you must provide three counter-arguments with accompanying refutes.* If done properly, the editorial has credibility, for it shows full understanding of the "other side's" argument but also shows why the command position is better.
- **RESEARCH IS KEY!** Otherwise, these are just your ideas and are easily ignored. If you're writing an editorial about donating blood, what does the Red Cross have to say? What about prominent celebrities or role models? Are there "true-to-life" stories that illustrate the points? Use this info in your editorial and tell the reader where you got the information.
- Before the conclusion/call to action, the body must **restate the command position**. It should reflect the same position given in the nut 'graph.

The editorial call to action

The conclusion of a true editorial must be a **call to action**. *Without a call to action, it's not an editorial!*

What do you want your readers to **do** with the information you've just given them in the lead, nut 'graph and body? You must tell them to take some sort of do-able, legitimate action.

Some examples:

- Blood donation editorial call to action = donate blood; encourage others to donate blood; volunteer at blood drives if you can't donate; etc.
- Drunken driving editorial call to action = use designated drivers; watch out for your friends; be a designated driver for holiday parties; etc.
- Life jackets editorial call to action = always wear a life jacket; be sure everyone on your boat wears a life jacket; make sure life jackets on your boat are the right sizes; etc.

Prewriting to write an editorial

Find a topic: Brainstorm. What controversial events have been in the news internationally, nationally or locally?

Research: Computer-assisted research, personal interviews, news articles on the subject, archives, personal interviews, library documents and other sources should give the writer an adequate background. It is virtually impossible to over-research a topic, especially if the topic is complicated or not generally understood by the reading public. Remember, there is no audience for an uninformed editorial.

Do not always take the easy route: Consider the less popular stand.

Take a reasonable approach: Since life has few absolutes or superlatives, remember to consider the degree and circumstance of the truth. Generally avoid inclusive words such as "always" or "never." Be specific and accurate with examples.

Refine the topic and sort arguments

Refining the topic is like narrowing the focus for a feature. What does all your research on the topic indicate is the center of controversy? Can you state this main idea, or thesis statement, in a clear, simple, understandable way? Is the topic arguable?

Once a narrowed-down, workable topic is developed, the writer must organize the information and sort the arguments. Which facts support the command position? Which argue against it? Could any be used to argue both sides?

Once all legitimate arguments are listed, the writer should rank the arguments from most effective to least effective. This ranking will come in handy later when trying to decide the order in which arguments should be presented in the body of the editorial.

Lining up content: the structure of an editorial

Refer to the handout linked below when organizing the information in your editorial.
Failure to follow this formula/structure will result in point deductions.

[Editorial structure](#)