

Opinion Columns

Newspapers and magazines often have columnists who write for them. Generally speaking newspapers or magazines want there to be a cult of personality surrounding these columnists to generate good sales and brand loyalty. Such is the case with Thomas Friedman of the New York Times (picture). Columnists may be very outspoken in their opinions. Nevertheless, their opinions are in tune with the readership of a particular magazine or newspaper. Furthermore, their opinions are newsworthy, meaning that they both comment on the hot topics of the day, and their opinions are worthy of publication.

If you choose to write an opinion column for your written task you may want to consider the following questions:

- Which publication would you be writing for?
- Are you imitating the style of a famous columnist?
- What makes your opinion newsworthy?

We suggest there are six defining characteristics of an opinion column. You will find evidence of these in Thomas Friedman's example below. As you read his column look for evidence of each defining characteristic.

Defining characteristics

While there are many stylistic and structural elements of opinion columns, here are six that you may find helpful for understanding their nature. If you decide to write an opinion column for your written task, you will want to include these six defining characteristics as well.

- **Voice** - This refers to many aspects of language including word choice, verb tense, tone and imagery.
- **Newsworthy** - Is the column relevant to its time? What makes it **newsworthy**?
- **Call to action** - Columnist usually call on the reader to become involved or care about an issue.
- **Humor** - This is really an aspect of voice. Humor usual helps readers see a topic through an original and fun perspective.
- **Hard facts** - This aspect of newsworthiness gives an opinion column credibility.
- **Logos** - Appealing to logic will help persuade your readers.

Global Weirding

Thomas Friedman

New York Times, February 17th 2010

Of the festivals of nonsense that periodically overtake American politics, surely the silliest is the argument that because Washington is having a particularly snowy winter it proves that climate change is a hoax and, therefore, we need not bother with all this girly-man stuff like renewable energy, solar panels and carbon taxes. **Just drill, baby, drill.**

When **you see lawmakers like Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina tweeting that “it is going to keep snowing until Al Gore cries ‘uncle,’”** or news that the grandchildren of Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma are building an igloo next to the Capitol with a big sign that says “Al Gore’s New Home,” you really wonder if we can have a serious discussion about the climate-energy issue anymore. [...]

Although there remains a mountain of research from multiple institutions about the reality of climate change, the public has grown uneasy. What’s real? In my view, **the climate-science community should convene its top experts** — from places like NASA, America’s national laboratories, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford, the California Institute of Technology and the U.K. Met Office Hadley Centre — and produce a simple 50-page report. They could call it “What We Know,” summarizing everything we already know about climate change in language that a sixth grader could understand, with unimpeachable peer-reviewed footnotes. [...]

Here are the points I like to stress:

1. Avoid the term “global warming.” I prefer the term **“global weirding,”** because that is what actually happens as global temperatures rise and the climate changes. The weather gets weird. The hots are expected to get hotter, the wets wetter, the dries drier and the most violent storms more numerous. The fact that it has snowed like crazy in Washington — while it has rained at the Winter Olympics in Canada, while Australia is having a record 13-year drought — is right in line with what **every major study on climate change predicts**: The weather will get weird; some areas will get more precipitation than ever; others will become drier than ever.
2. Historically, we know that the climate has warmed and cooled slowly, going from Ice Ages to warming periods, driven, in part, by changes in the earth’s orbit and hence the amount of sunlight different parts of the earth get. What the current debate is about is whether humans — by emitting so much carbon and thickening the greenhouse-gas blanket around the earth so that it traps more heat — are now rapidly exacerbating nature’s natural warming cycles to a degree that could lead to dangerous disruptions.
3. Those who favor taking action are saying: “Because the warming that humans are doing is irreversible and potentially catastrophic, **let’s buy some insurance** — by investing in renewable energy, energy efficiency and mass transit — because this insurance will also actually make us richer and more secure.” We will import less oil, invent and export more clean-tech products, send fewer dollars overseas to buy oil and, most importantly, diminish the dollars that are sustaining the worst petro-dictators in the world who indirectly fund terrorists and the schools that nurture them.

4. Even if climate change proves less catastrophic than some fear, in a world that is forecast to grow from 6.7 billion to 9.2 billion people between now and 2050, more and more of whom will live like Americans, demand for renewable energy and clean water is going to soar. It is obviously going to be the next great global industry.

China, of course, understands that, which is why it is investing heavily in clean-tech, efficiency and high-speed rail. It sees the future trends and is betting on them. Indeed, I suspect China is quietly laughing at us right now. And Iran, Russia, Venezuela and the whole OPEC gang are high-fiving each other. Nothing better serves their interests than to see Americans becoming confused about climate change, and, therefore, less inclined to move toward clean-tech and, therefore, more certain to remain addicted to oil. Yes, sir, it is morning in Saudi Arabia.

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/17/opinion/17friedman.html?_r=0

The opinion column is very similar to - but not exactly the same as - several other text types.

- **Editorial** - At times, the reader of a magazine or newspaper gets to hear the editor's voice directly. This usually takes the form of a brief explanation or justification on how they have decided to cover a topic in their newspaper or magazine. Remember, editors are the gatekeepers at a publishing house who decide what goes in to the final publication. In an editorial they may comment on their journalists' fieldwork, their columnists' reputation, or their newspapers' status in society. Here are some questions that you may want to consider when writing an editorial: Which publication are you the editor of? Who are your readers? What kinds of decisions have you had to make regarding your publications and how do you justify them to your readers?
- **Op-ed** - Sometimes famous people also like their opinions to be printed in newspapers or magazines. 'Op-ed' stands for 'opposite the editorial', as this is where these opinion pieces used to appear in traditional media. The general of an army may write an op-ed about the status of war. A famous rock star may write an op-ed in Rolling Stone magazine. The president of a country may write a letter to a political opponent, which he or she wishes to be published as an op-ed. Here are some questions that you may want to consider when writing an op-ed: Who are you pretending to write as, and what have you done that gives you important cultural status? Why are you publishing your opinions through a certain newspaper?
- **Essay** - There are two definitions of an essay: 1) An essay is a means of assessing one's academic understanding of a topic. The student makes persuasive arguments in favor of a certain, educated position on an issue. 2) An essay can also be a creative, philosophical work. Titles such as 'On Riding One's Bike to Work' may form a nice piece on existentialism. But in more concrete terms, popular works of non-fiction, such as *No Logo* or *Buyology* make cases as extended essays should. You may not write either forms of essay writing for your written task.

<http://www.thinkib.net/englishalanglit/page/10263/opinion-column>