

# WRITING OPINION

## THE 2010/2011 GATEWAY GUIDE





# The Gateway Opinion Guide

## 2010/2011



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Journalism Society



# INTRODUCTION

If you're wondering why you should write opinion when the news is supposed to be balanced and whatever, the short answer is that it's fun.

The longer answer is that it's an important part of journalism. It engages the reader in ways that just telling a story doesn't, it gives people a chance to be part of the conversation, and it can present information in provocative and intriguing ways.

But, again, the short answer is that it's really fun. You have the freedom to tell people what to think, and watch them not read your article properly and get disproportionately angry! You get to write seriously, humourously, or however you like. Every section will claim it's the best, but the freedom in opinion is what secures us the title. You don't hate freedom, do you? Didn't think so.

In your hands lies the collective wisdom of four generations of Gateway Opinion Editors, updated and reworked by a fifth. Unless you found this discarded on a bus, you're probably already thinking about writing for The Gateway's opinion section yourself, so that sell earlier was kind of a waste of time. You've decided that you need to share your many opinions with the world, or, at the least, with whoever picks up the paper every Wednesday.

But maybe you don't quite know how to take those opinions out of your soft, delicious brain and get them on a page. Perhaps you want to get more familiar with particular techniques of opinion writing. Or maybe you're already absolutely brilliant, and you just want to know what The Gateway's process is.

Whatever the case, this guide will tell you everything you need to know to go from a lost, timid, possibly frightened new volunteer, to the dizzying heights of minor campus celebrity.

I can't guarantee that it's a level of fame that comes with illegal drugs, however. You're on your own there.

Ryan Bromsgrove  
Opinion Editor 2011/12

# GATEWAY OPINION

## Meetings, Deadlines

*The Gateway* is published most Wednesdays. Every section has a weekly meeting in order to discuss business for the upcoming week's newspaper.

Opinion meetings are held each Wednesday at 5 p.m.

Opinion is a little different than sections like News or Arts & Culture, because I don't generally give you assignments. Instead, it's up to you remarkable people to tell me what you want to write about, in the form of a pitch.

Meetings for the Opinion section are largely a group discussion. We begin with introductions to make sure the new people feel welcome. Following that, sometimes there will be an exciting mini-workshop — absolutely free! This will be around five minutes about some aspect of opinion writing. After a quick look through the shiny new copies of that day's paper, we'll launch into discussion, beginning with a few current news stories that, hint hint, would make great ideas for articles.

The group discussion portion is a good time to float around ideas, as well as an opportunity to get in on group commentaries and point/counterpoints. In particular, many of the best humour articles emerge directly out of the chaotic inappropriate joking of the opinion section meetings.

The weekly deadline to get your awesome words into the illustrious pages of *The Gateway* is 9 p.m. on Sundays.

Earlier is always better, especially if

you're a new writer, as it gives me time to send it back to you if it needs changes. If you need more time, let me know as soon as possible. I get that *The Gateway* doesn't take priority over real life, but you'll always know if you can't make a deadline, and there's plenty of opportunity for extensions.

I'll take copy as Word (.doc or .docx), Pages (.pages), or Open Office (.odt) documents, or as plain text in the body of an e-mail. Attempts to send copy via semaphore will be ignored.

## Opinion Section Anatomy

### Break Page

News gets the front page of the paper, but every other section's first page is called the "break page." Traditionally in opinion, the break page contains the editorial, an editorial cartoon, and letters and comments. This year, we may switch things up a bit and put some volunteer-written content on it as well.

### Editorial

These are special opinion articles, in that they're only written by editors, and they live on the break page. As a rule, we keep the editorials serious and focused on current events. So, no, you won't find anything about orgy etiquette here.

The order in which they're written will usually follow the masthead, beginning with the Editor-in-Chief, and looping back after the Online Editor. That'd be the plan, anyhow. Volunteers are welcome to start a betting pool on when all order breaks down and I start bugging Justin to write them all.

## **Microtorial**

When an editorial just doesn't fill up its column nicely, we resort to a microtorial. Still written by an editor, it's tiny, can be about anything, and sometimes comes in haiku form.

## **Letters and Comments**

People send us letters. Some of them are nice, some of them are mean, and some of them are people who just want to see their name in print. In order to make them feel like their voices count — I mean, in recognition that they're an important part of the conversation — we put them on the break page. When we don't have enough letters, which is the norm, we paste in some comments from the website, or we go back in time and reprint letters from decades ago, resurrecting some long-dead former student's petty complaints about people who talk in class.

## **Editorial Cartoons**

An exciting way for a volunteer to ensure placement on the break page! Only, you have to be able to draw funny things. It doesn't have to relate to any of the articles that we're printing that week, but it does have to be about something current. Let me know if you have any ideas. The deadline for the editorial cartoons is very flexible, since it's not going through the gauntlet of edits that normal articles brave.

## **Everything Else**

While we may experiment with putting some volunteer-submitted content on the break page this year, the bulk of it will be on the other pages. The size and shape of the rest of the section depends on how many ads we sell that week, and how many people are contributing. So more people willing to contribute means a

larger opinion section, which means we're number one!

## **Illustrations & Photo Illustrations**

Sometimes, an article contains an idea that really lends itself well to a photo or an illustration. When this is the case, I'll try to make it happen. Photos are generally staged on press days, when the article is on the page and I know how much space I'm working with. So volunteers in the office on press days may be drafted into posing for photos. It may be embarrassing, or it may be the thing that gets your unrequited love interest sitting two rows in front of you in Math to finally notice you exist and ask you out because you're too shy to start a conversation.

Let's say the article is crying out for something visual, but it's about something we just can't take a photo of. Like an astronaut fighting off a giant space velociraptor. This means a drawn illustration may be called for. I hope to sneakily become familiar with this year's comic artists so that I can beg them to draw such marvels. If you don't want the commitment of a comic, but you do want to occasionally get a drawing in the paper, let me know.

## **Headlines**

You don't write the headlines. Back off, they're mine!

Even if you come up with the most fantastic headline, one that perfectly sums up your article while remaining punchy and exciting enough to draw in the readers, it's all for nothing when it doesn't fit the space I'm working with. Headlines have to fit the horizontal space perfectly, which means the font size gets changed, words get contracted, expanded, and deleted, synonyms sidle in, the entire headline gets replaced with "dicks dicks

dicks” while I tear my hair out rewriting the whole thing, before the perfect phrase finally slinks into the space.

If something really clever just happens to pop in your head, there’s no harm sending it with the article, just know that the chance it will be used is vanishingly tiny.

### **Headboxes**

All it takes to get your picture in the paper at *The Gateway* is writing a full-length opinion article, or contributing to a Point/Counterpoint. That’s right, no mere by-lines here, you get a whole headbox, just for your beautiful face. Contact the Photo Editor to get your photo taken prior to the publication of your first article.

## **Types of Articles**

So that last paragraph’s convinced you to write for opinion, right? Good. Your next question is going to be, “but what sorts of things can I write?” Don’t worry, I got your back.

### **Basic Article, 500-650 words**

These are usually the bulk of the section’s content, and they can be about almost anything. If you’re taking a serious current event, for instance, you want to take a stance right away and make an argument. If you’re going for satire, you may want to take a bad argument that someone else is making, and put it on display. Or maybe you want to write a humour piece about how much cooler life would be if at our 10th birthday we were all handed a Pokemon and told to go on a journey around the country, fighting bug catchers and creepy middle-aged fat mountain hikers. Whatever you’re writing about, the key is catching a reader’s attention, and keeping it til the end. It’s

better to write beyond the word limit than not hit it, because it’s easier for me to cut stuff than it is to send it back to you because I need another paragraph, but don’t go nuts.

### **Burlap Sack, 200-300 words**

Everyone hates things. If you don’t, I advise you to start. Burlap Sacks involve you taking something awful, and pulling some good out of it by publicly lambasting it. Things like that asshole in English who keeps trying to make the lessons be about his love for cats. They’re useful space-fillers, and aren’t always time-sensitive. Ideally, I’ll have a collection that I can pull from to fill in holes as needed. Not-ideally, I’ll poke people to write me some as soon as I realize I’m screwed otherwise.

### **Marble Pedestal, 200-300 words**

The opposite of a Burlap Sack, this is what you can write when you want to immortalize something indescribably awesome — though you do actually have to describe it. We don’t tend to run these too often because, well, it’s easier to hate. If you’re feeling all hated-out, however, it’s an option.

### **Point/Counterpoint, 400-500 words**

Two writers fight to the death. Their weapons? Prose.

Normally, if two people want to write about the same thing, the first person to ask gets to do it, and the second must live with the shame of not being quite as fast as the first. If they’re both on opposite sides of an issue, however, a Point/Counterpoint allows them both to deal with it, albeit with slightly fewer words each. These can be serious or humorous. If heated words begin to be exchanged

during a meeting, and the first few bars of the Kirk Vs. Spock music slowly start fading in, an efficient way for me to both quiet the conflict and ensure a nice chunk of copy for the next issue will be to voluntell both sides to do a Point/Counterpoint.

### **Group Commentary, 200-250 words**

If something comes up that allows for a variety of interesting viewpoints, a group commentary is often the answer. Again, these can be serious or humorous, but usually end up on the silly side. Best item of clothing seen on a cat, for instance, or greatest thing said on Fox News this week. If you're new to this opinion thing, a group commentary is an excellent place to start. The word requirement is low, and I plan to run one every week. If you're not new to this opinion thing, but you are new to this humour thing, this is also a good place to start. It's hard to keep humour on one topic going for 500 words, but it's relatively easy to take one absurd question and get a group of writers to each come up with a funny answer. I'll bring a group commentary idea to a meeting, but it's also likely that the meetings will present a bunch of ideas as well. And if you have an idea for one, send it my way.

### **Students' Union Council, 250-400 words**

New this year, I want to encourage more coverage of Students' Union affairs in the opinion section. To help make this happen, I'm going to run a short piece every two weeks on something that the SU recently debated in council. If you're interested in doing this, I intend to be at most Student's Union Council sessions this year. There's always someone from News as well, so there will be no shortage of

potential Gateway companionship in the cold and unforgiving Council Chamber. Also, they give out free food.

Since this is a new type of article, I don't yet know how it's going to work. Council is held every second Tuesday, so come along if you're up to trying something new.

### **The Gateway Opinion Section Podcast**

Also new this year, this is my plan to offer online-only opinion content in the wake of going down to publishing once a week. At the beginning of the year, I'll be inviting specific volunteers to help put it together, but I hope that within a few weeks enough kinks will have been worked out that I can open it up to whoever wants in. The rough plan is to get three people, including myself, talking for ten or fifteen minutes about some current events, and then removing anything that isn't funny. If you have any interest in the podcast, be it speaking or production, let me know.

## **Opinion Article Anatomy**

Great, now you've decided on the type of article you want to write. But how the hell are you going to write it? I'm wrote the following with the basic 500-650 word piece in mind, but pretty much the same thing goes for the others.

### **The Lede**

Pronounce it "leed." This is the first sentence of your article, which makes it the most important sentence in your article. If you don't grab your readers attention with the lede, they probably won't bother to read the rest.

## Bad Ledes

Many people have applauded the recent decision by the Olympic Committee to officially designate the competitive play of the 2010 video game, available on PC and Mac, Starcraft 2, as a sport, but it lacks everything the Olympic Games stand for.

The conservative Government is currently in the process of putting a bill through the House of Commons that would make it illegal to stand within fifty meters of a marijuana paraphernalia establishment.

Neither are true, of course, but both are boring. Excessive length, big words, weird clause order, too many commas, and unforgivable dryness are all things you should watch out for. Here's how I might rewrite them.

## Good Ledes

If Starcraft 2 is a sport, the 400-pound greasy neck-bearded blob of flesh that wont move out of his parents' basement is an athlete.

Facing a falling crime rate, the conservative government is reaching at pathetically absurd extremes to populate its new prisons.

There's no magic formula for getting the perfect lede. The first rewrite makes the opinion obscenely clear right away. The second has pushed the actual issue back to the second sentence, but it's teasing it with charged language. If you're having trouble writing a good lede, don't sit there

staring at the page. Get the rest of the writing done, and then come back to it.

## The Introduction

Take, at most, two paragraphs to set up the issue. The reader needs to know what the controversy is, and who's involved. Make sure your opinion is obvious at this point. Don't worry about setting up several threads of arguments that all come together at the end revealing an incontrovertible objective fact. Tell people what you think at the beginning, and spend the rest of the article convincing them.

## The Body

This is where you deftly explain your opinion with sound reasoning and impenetrable argument. To take that second lede example, this is where you would show how such a law would infringe on your constitutional rights, where you would call into question the general ridiculousness of "tough on crime" policies, or alternatively, where you would applaud the government for finally doing something about these obvious dens of pot-smoking depravity.

## The Conclusion

Since you've made your opinion clear throughout, you're not so much concluding as you're facing the inevitable task of closing out your piece in a satisfying way. Take the last paragraph to summarize the issue and restate your point in a fascinating new way that forces smart readers to agree with you, and dumb readers to send in angry comments. Just like with the lede, there are no magic formulae for perfection here, but you do want to avoid saying things like "in conclusion," and "overall." The reader knows they're at the end, and they're ready to move on early if

you're boring.

## But How Do I Write?

### Choose a Topic

If you're sitting around, and you suddenly think, "hey, I want *The Gateway* to print my headbox this week, I should write an article!" you may run into the problem of not having an idea. The best way to come up with an awesome topic is to always be on the lookout until something pops into your head, or by coming to the meetings. Failing those, if you just want to write about something, scour the news.

The best topics are going to be the ones where you can say something that nobody else has said. While I won't discourage writing about international events, the truth is that someone else has probably said something similar, and even if you've said it better, you're competing with large national and international publications for an audience. You'll probably lose.

National events will have you running into the same problems, but to a smaller degree. The best articles are going to be about provincial, municipal, and university-related issues. *The Gateway's* readership is primarily students at the University of Alberta, and secondarily whoever happens upon the website. While you'll find many, many students here almost adorably obsessed with international activism, the vast majority of students care much more about the province, the city, and the university that they do anything else, especially considering the lack of a federal election for the next four years and the presence of a provincial election. You'll have more success tackling these issues.

University issues are especially excellent options. Don't worry that you're limiting your audience to students — like I said, they're the primary audience anyhow. The advantage of writing about a university issue is that you are far, far more likely to hit upon some novel opinion than you are with any other topic, because we're usually the only ones writing about them.

### Pitch the topic

You have to let me know what you want to write about before you start writing. I'll say yes to almost anything, but if you write on something that I've already got someone else doing, you'll have wasted your time.

### Have an opinion

Yes, it sounds obvious, but you need to have an opinion about what you're writing about. You can't just write a summary of an event, because then you'd be writing news or an academic essay, both incredibly boring. So figure out what you think about a topic before you start writing. Don't worry if you have a controversial opinion — all the better! And you don't have to give both sides of the story: there's no need for balance here. But you do have to back your opinion up with arguments, facts, and, hopefully, wit. Having said that, don't be afraid to take a nuanced position, so long as you can keep it interesting and it doesn't read as if you're backing down. There are times when you want to be black, times you want to be white, and times you want to be mauve.

### State your opinion

Oh yeah, you have to actually say what your opinion is. I know that I already told you this when I described the

introduction, but I'm going to restate it: make your opinion clear in the first two paragraphs. Otherwise I'll probably have to send the piece back, asking, "what did you think about this, again?" When you get to the body, keep it in mind. While you're weaving your expert arguments in support of your opinion, you need to make sure the reader doesn't forget what it was. You can treat the reader like a functioning human being and end up with many getting bored three paragraphs in, or you can treat them like idiots and at least get people to read to the end.

### **Find a good angle**

Let's say something terrible happens. A terrorist attack on the World's Largest Cowboy Boot. Nobody is going to want to read an article that states the obvious opinion that it was bad. What they might be more interested in would be an article damning some aspect of society that enabled the attack, or perhaps a piece slamming the political response to it.

The angle you take is going to affect the argument that you make. Returning to the fake lede about the marijuana, two writers may both think it's a bad move by the government, but one might approach the topic by criticizing it as an absurd result of a tough on crime agenda in a country with low crime rates. Another might trace the bill back to a small group that has been petitioning the government to pass the bill and call them out for trying to impose their views on society. The angle you take is what's going to make your piece special amongst the cacophony of commenters, so make it good.

### **Advice from High School English Teachers**

My predecessor, Alix Kemp, contributed

some teacher-based advice last year, and it's so good I'm leaving it in.

"I'm going to take this opportunity to pass on some advice from my high school English teacher. Whenever I wrote an essay, he would go on and on about being concise, precise and convincing.

Basically, get to the point, say what you mean as clearly as possible without wasting time, and make a good argument. Don't use big, complicated words where a simple one will do the job; don't digress on tangents unless they serve a purpose that contributes to the article in a significant way; and always support your arguments with any evidence or information you have to back up your claims.

If your piece has a strong, well-supported, and well-written argument, readers are much more likely to like you and agree with you — and even if they don't, they'll find it much more difficult to refute what you have to say."

And now I'm going to add my own advice from my high school English teacher: PEE all over your work.

It stands for "Point, Example, Explain." You make a point, you give an example of it, and you explain. You can switch up the order so that you don't sound like you're reading out a list, but this is a good technique that can quickly get a lot of information across in a relatable way, without leaving the feeling that you've forgotten something. Like so:

"As we can see by the recent debt-ceiling debacle, the United States government has a horrible inability to work with itself. Republicans and Democrats from both houses refused to compromise until the very last minute, resulting in a substandard solution that helps few."

You tell the reader what you want them to remember, you give them an example

supporting that point, and then you link the two together to hammer it home.

And I just did it to you.”

### **Originality**

Don't go for easy jokes that people have heard a million times. And don't let clichés spread like wildfire. Let your similes be like smiling newborn babies ready to meet the world, and have your metaphors be juggernauts of originality. Or something.

Oh, and don't be a Dean of Medicine and Dentistry.

### **Tone and Voice**

So you've figured out what you're writing about, you've decided what side you're on, and, what's more, you've got an angle so fresh you can still smell the dirt on it.

Not so fast, young college student. Have you considered tone and voice yet?

That's right, we're still not done here. Tone is like the mood of your article. Are you going to be writing seriously, humorously or flippantly?

The tone of the article is going to lead you to your voice. I don't mean your personal voice, but the voice you're going to write the article in. You can and absolutely should experiment with this for the entire year. Being able to write in a variety of voices will give you a lot of writing flexibility, and practically hand you a diverse portfolio.

The voice you write in is who you want the reader to think that you are. We all know that you're a young university student with an inextinguishable passion for journalism, but we're all willing to pretend that you're an absent-minded hobo who feels strongly about the state of the city's potholes — if you're able to sound like one. You can be furious, ear-

nest, thoughtful, or whatever you like. You can invent a character one week and then be yourself the next. There's no ultimate right answer to which voice is the right one for your topic. Decide what you want to convince people of, and go with whatever voice you think best suits your argument.

Oh, except try not to come across as pretentious or condescending, and you do want the voice to be consistent. And don't crack jokes in an article about a school shooting. In general, a serious topic will lead to a serious tone, which demands a serious voice. But techniques like satire will prevent that being an unbreakable rule.

After you're done writing, read through it as if it were someone talking it to you. Does it sound like it was all written by the same person? Does it sound like someone could have just ranted it out on a stage? Can you describe that person's emotions, perhaps some personality traits? If so, great, you've got yourself a solid voice.

## **How Do I Be Funny?**

I don't know. You just sort of write, and then an amusing phrase appears on the page. It's hard to teach humour, but it's one of the best ways to get people to like you. And when people like you, you can get away with saying what would normally be incredibly unpopular. George Carlin could get laughs out of outright mocking Christians, despite many people in his audiences being Christian. But this is in the context of having warmed up the crowd with other jokes first.

If you're going to be funny, it needs to be in line with your voice. You can't just throw in one awkward joke three

quarters of the way through a serious article about the plight of the Palestinians. It'll feel out of place at best, and offensive at worst.

### **Surprise**

This is probably the biggest thing to keep in mind. If the reader sees something he wasn't expecting, that enough can be enough to jolt out a smile.

### **Bookending**

I'm not a particular fan of bookending as a comic device, but some people like it. You make some remark at the introduction that you return to in the conclusion. The return has to be unexpected for it to be funny, of course.

### **Exaggeration, Understatement**

Making a small thing seem ridiculously important, or making an important thing seem ridiculously small are relatively reliable ways of injecting some humour. Just make sure that they're obvious, or it won't be funny at all — just kind of weird.

### **Tangents**

Keep these out of serious writing, but feel free to throw them into humour. If one minute you're snarkily dissecting Bill O'Reilly's latest gaff, and then you talk about how he reminds you of that time in middle school that you just couldn't look away from the kid eating glue and then his mom had to come to take him to the hospital and you didn't see him again all week and then when he was back he started eating glue all over again, that could work. Just make sure that both the tangent and the article itself are both funny — otherwise it'll be like that time the Family Guy writers just plain gave up.

### **Irony & Sarcasm**

Say one thing while it's obvious you mean something else. I won't get into a discussion of whether or not sarcasm is a subset of irony, or that it uses irony, or whatever. Generally, sarcasm is always harsh and hostile, intended as an attack. Irony in general is without this restriction, and is an excellent source of humour. Excessive use of sarcasm gets boring fast (and makes you look like a meanie), but it's effective in small doses. Be aware, of course, that your writing doesn't rely on inflections in the same way that spoken words are, so make it very obvious what you mean when you're saying things that you don't mean. If you know what I mean.

### **Self-Deprecation**

If you make fun of yourself in your article, that gives hostile readers one fewer thing to attack you about. It's hard to criticize someone who's already done some of the work himself. Self-deprecation is also endearing to many people, especially when you hit one of those personal flaws that almost anyone has but no one talks about. Like how I'm horribly afraid of ketchup.

Oh wait, that's not me, and it's not normal.

### **Puns & Wordplay**

I love puns. Even the bad ones. As long as you're trying to write humour, that is, and not just trying to be cute in a serious article. The caveat is be original. Nobody wants to read the same turn of phrase they've read a million times before.

### **Satire**

Satire is personally the most fun I've had writing. It's not really a form of humour, though it often uses it heavily.

Essentially, you find something that's completely ridiculous and pretend that it's entirely reasonable. The act of taking an absurd argument and putting it on display in such a way that the reader knows that you know it's an absurd argument is incredibly effective. It's very hard to refute good satire, because you're not so much putting your own argument explicitly forward as you are showing the ineptness of someone else's argument and winning people to your side by default. Just avoid strawmen arguments (which you can read more about in the Logical Fallacies section). Satire is hard to pull off, but when you do it right it's worth the effort.

## Research and Libel

Sometimes you can sit down, write for a couple of hours, and send in the article. But a lot of opinion articles are going to require some degree of research. Any time you reference a fact that I'm not aware of myself, I'm going to have to check it. So when you're using news articles, books, speeches, or whatever, to back up your argument, please include links to anything you used. If you put a quote in there, I need to be able to see where you got it. If you're writing about how Ketchup has been found to cause cancer, I will be suspicious and will want to check the paper you read.

### Some sources for research:

Google

Wikipedia (But use it as a starting point only. Check out the references for better sources.)

BBC/The Globe and Mail/National Post or your favourite news source

Stats Canada

The official University of Alberta website ([www.ualberta.ca](http://www.ualberta.ca))

The Students' Union website ([www.su.ualberta.ca](http://www.su.ualberta.ca))

Old issues of the Gateway

Your local library

Don't be afraid of approaching people for interviews. You'd be surprised who'll talk to you, even though we're just a student paper. And if they say no, sometimes that can be almost as useful as if they'd said yes. Be upfront with the request, and tell them it'll be for an opinion article. That way they can't get mad later on if they say something remarkably stupid that helps a case against them. Make sure you take a recorder.

If you don't know where to start, talk to me. I will help you if I know my help is going to result in a hole being filled on my pages.

### Libel

Like a slightly nerdier Justice League, *The Gateway's* editorial team forever watches over our innocent paper, guarding against the expensive forces of libel. But you can help by keeping it out of your articles in the first place.

Libel is written defamation. If something we print lowers the reputation of someone or something, then unless it's true, we can get sued. So don't accuse people of things you have no evidence of. You can't say that Stephen Harper eats babies, but you can say that his strange ability to weather any political scandal would probably mean he'd get away with eating babies. There's still plenty of room to mock people and have negative opinions, you just have to not lie, basically.

# Grammar, etc.

## Contractions

Use contractions. Our primary audience is reading *The Gateway* because they don't want to read an academic article. Don't make it seem like they are. There are occasions where a "will not" or a "cannot" will work better for emphasis, but usually you'll just sound pretentious.

## Rhetorical Questions?

If you use rhetorical questions, some readers will start to answer them. It invites people to actively question what you've just said, and if there's a flaw in the argument, it will pretty much paint a target on it. Got it?

## Passive vs. Active Voice

"The dinosaur ate the goat," is in active voice. "The goat was eaten by the dinosaur," is in passive voice. Many writing guides will tell you that passive voice is useless and to be avoided at all times. Passive voice isn't useless, but opinion writing will benefit much more from active voice in most circumstances.

## Exclamations!!!

You'll almost never need them in a serious article. And by "almost never," I mean don't use them in serious articles.

## Double Spaces After Periods

Most people have gotten the memo already about not using double spaces between sentences, but in case you haven't, don't do it.

## Ellipses ...

You want to be decisive and strong, not weakly trailing off...

## (Parentheses)

Don't use them. If you find yourself using them anyhow, make them em-dashes — these pretty little things — because that's what I'm going to change them to anyway. On a Windows computer, you can make them with Alt+0151, or Ctrl-Alt-hyphen when in Microsoft Office. On Macs, just use Option-Shift-hyphen. On Linux, go eat a dick.

## "Quotes"

Use quotes to cite evidence in support of your own argument, but don't quote somebody else's argument. And never end on a quote. This is all about you.

## Weasel Words

If the thrust of your argument is peppered with "maybes" and "perhapses," you won't sound too confident. You might sometimes want to use a "possibly" when conceding one point, but you'd better follow up with something forceful.

# Logical Fallacies

If you've never heard of these before, then prepare to have your mind blown by how depressingly pervasive they are in the general discourse of society. A logical fallacy is what happens when an argument's premises don't directly lead to the conclusion. This doesn't always mean that the conclusion is false, just that the argumentation to get to it is flawed. It's usually the case that there's a premise that's missing from the argument, that if explicitly laid out would be obviously false. You should be very familiar with logical fallacies, because if you get caught using one, you'll look dumb at best, and dishonest at worst.

If you catch somebody else in a fallacy, however, you'll look awesome. A quick test is to take the argument and see if you can replace the variables and get an obviously incorrect result.

Here are some examples, but for more, check out <http://www.logicalfallacies.info/>

### **Ad Hominem**

This method of argument attacks a person instead of their claim, specifically implying that the claim is false because of some unrelated negative characteristic of the person.

Rory Tighe relies too much on “tie” puns, so whatever he says at council is wrong.

Stephen Harper is an asshole, therefore his stance on the economy is wrong.

It's worth noting a couple of subtleties, however. Just because you're insulting someone doesn't mean you're committing an ad hominem. You can absolutely say that Rory Tighe's reliance on “tie” puns displays a disappointing lack of creativity. And you can totally call people assholes all you like, as long as you aren't using the insult as a critical part of your argument.

### **Argument from ignorance**

Because no one can prove something, it means that something has to be so.

You can't explain what a UFO is, therefore it's got to be aliens.

You can't explain how magnets work, so obviously it's miracles.

### **Appeal to Authority**

This is when you attempt to prove something is true by virtue of some apparent authority saying so.

My English prof told me that witchcraft was true, so it is.

George Foreman endorses a line of indoor grilling appliances, so they must be good.

Just because Foreman's name is on a grill, doesn't mean it's good. They are good grills, but not because he's got his name on them. Appeals to authority are legitimate, however, when the authority actually is an authority.

The overwhelming scientific consensus on climate change is that it's anthropogenic, so it probably is.

It's a very reasonable inductive argument, but no, it's not completely logically sound — welcome to the problem of induction. We have to use inductive arguments, but we can never be totally certain that their conclusions are correct. I'm not getting into epistemological rabbit holes here: inductive arguments are fine as long as they carry sufficient weight. If you want to get really technical, I'm also appealing to probability, which is fine when the odds are extremely high, but not fine when you're making it up or guessing.

### **Appeal to the Masses**

Many people think something is true, therefore it is.

A million flies can't be wrong: shit tastes good.

A lot of people voted for the

Conservatives, therefore they deserve full power in Parliament.

Yep, even democracy is fallacious. Let's just hope it's less fallacious than dictatorship.

### **Appeal to Novelty**

Newer things are better.

Resident Evil 5 is better than Resident Evil 4 because it's newer.

CCIS is a new building, so it's way better than the lame old CEB.

### **Appeal to Tradition**

Something is good because it's tradition, or has been around for a long time.

Marriage is traditionally defined as between a man and a woman, therefore it should stay that way.

Slavery has traditionally been practised throughout the world, so it still should be.

### **Begging the Question and Circular Reasoning**

Something "begs the question" not when it's inadvertently prompting a question some could accuse it of ignoring — don't use the phrase this way, I will cry — but when what an argument is trying to prove is actually an assumption in the premises. It's apparent in, say, this version of the ontological argument for the existence of God.

God has all perfections.  
Existence is a perfection.  
Therefore God exists.

If you look carefully, the first premise is actually assuming that God already exists. "God has" implies "God is," which is problematic as it's what the argument is trying to conclude.

Circular reasoning is, well, circular. It just keeps going round and round.

I know the Bible is true because it was written by God. I know God wrote the Bible because the Bible says so.

### **False dichotomy**

This is when you present two opposing ideas as being the only possible options. You generally prove one of them to be undesirable, leaving your own as the solution by default. This dichotomy is false when there are actually other options.

You're either part of the solution, or you're part of the problem.

When this is about, say, apathy, this may be fine. When it's about raising money for hockey uniforms for orphans, it probably doesn't apply. Especially if you hate orphans and, therefore, don't see a problem.

We either shut down socialized medicine, or we have to raise taxes to absurd levels.

There may be a lot of options that aren't stated, like, perhaps, cutting the funding for a fifty foot solid gold statue of Stephen Harper.

Sorry about all the Stephen Harper examples. I'm still kind of bitter.

### **Middle Ground Fallacy**

In many ways, the opposite of the false dichotomy. This one presents two extremes and argue that the truth is in the

middle ground.

Some people think that Transformers 2 had just enough robot fights, while others thought robots are stupid and it shouldn't have been made at all. Therefore it should have been made, but with only half as many robot fights.

Some people think that invading Afghanistan and Iraq was awesome, while others think we should have stayed out completely. So obviously, what we should have done was only invaded one of them.

### **Slippery Slope Fallacy**

If we make one minor concession here, the next thing you know, we'll have this major undesirable outcome! Therefore, we shouldn't make that minor concession.

If we let gay people marry, next we'll have to let people marry horses and sheep and cartoons and oh god where will it all end!

### **Strawman**

This is when you misrepresent an opponent, tear the misrepresented opponent, and then pretend that you refuted your opponent's actual position. If you're not yet convinced of the power of fallacious arguments to completely prevent rational discourse in society, I have but one example for you.

The Universal Healthcare bill would put your grandma in front of a death panel.

### **Reductio ad Hitlerum**

I don't like the Latin fallacy names, but

this is one I can get behind. This is when you compare something that you don't like to Hitler or the Nazi party. Seriously, don't do this. Don't even get close. Ever. There's no excuse. Even if you wanted to use it quasi legitimately, the only man who gets close to Hitler was Stalin, and it's very unlikely you'll be arguing about one of Stalin's policies in The Gateway's opinion section.

Stephen Harper wants to increase military spending to better assert Arctic sovereignty. You know who else increased military spending in the interests of land? Hitler.

I'd be a little wary of the "Socialist Party" if I were you. You know who else had the word "socialist" in the name? The Nazis.

## **I Wrote Something! Now What?**

Edit it. Yeah yeah, that's my job, but you'll learn how to write well much faster by editing your own work. The most important thing is succinctly summed up as "omit needless words."

If you can cut a word, you should cut it. If you can think of one word that neatly replaces two others, use it. And if you can think of a shorter word that conveys as much information as a longer word, use it. Are all of your "that"s and "just"s necessary? Does that "really" really need to be there? And wouldn't "must" be much better than "has to?" And isn't "got" much shorter than "obtained?"

You should also check for awkward sentences, clumsy phrasing, and too many commas. Make sure your paragraphs

connect, and if they don't, feel free to move them around or add a smoother transition.

## **Okay, it's Edited Geez**

When you're finally done, you can send it to me. But there's still a lot that stands in the way of your excellent, well-constructed article getting on the page.

First, I read over it and do a round of edits. If something isn't clear, or something's missing, or you've stated a fact I can't check, or there's just way, way too much work to be done on it, I'll send it back to you with my edits in bold, and an explanation of what I need. This is why it's in your best interests to meet the deadline, or get it in sooner. I can't just throw another paragraph in there, or clarify something if I'm not sure of what you mean. This is your opinion piece, not mine.

Whether it takes zero, one, or more email exchanges, once I'm satisfied with it, it's ready to move on. But not to the page yet. Before it even gets laid out next to that important headbox photo, the Managing Editor is going to read it. He's going to spot things that got past me, double check I've done sufficient fact-checking, and berate me if I let something terrible get through. But I get it back, and I make the required changes.

Now it's press day, and time to finally put your article on the page. Your glorious Opinion Editor will paste your words into a box and then swear because they don't fit properly. Words will be cut, added and moved around. Paragraphs will be split up and recombined, and perhaps some

particularly witty text will be enshrined as a pull-quote. Then maybe I'll realize that I need two lines for a good headline, and so all that moving around happens again.

But eventually it'll look just right. I'll print out the page, and hand it over to the Editor-in-Chief. Several minutes later, I'll get it back. More fact-checking may be required, more clarifications may be made, and the general layout of the page will be nudged around to get the spacing right. I'll print out the page again, and this time give it to the Managing Editor, who will hand it back with one more round of changes. After I've made these last adjustments, I call the Editor-in-Chief over again, she gives it final approval, and it's ready to go. The file is saved, the final versions of the articles are sent to the Online Editor, and I get to go drown my sorrows in delicious alcohol, before doing it all again next week.

So yeah, the sooner you get me copy, the better positioned I am to make it the best it can be. If I get it three hours after the deadline and it needs more work from you, there may simply not be enough time to get it in the paper that week. If your piece is about current events, that means it'll either be online-only, or not in The Gateway at all. That'll make both of us sad.

## **Criticism**

There's no way to sugar-coat this. The vast majority of website commenters and letter writers will hate what you have to say, and perhaps even call you hurtful names. Don't worry about this. It's far more likely for someone who disagrees with you to make their opinion known

than it is for someone who agrees with you to say “nice job.” If commenters are ever getting you down, remember that it made it past three different editors: it has merit. Regardless of what someone says to you, you cannot respond to reader comments. If you do this knowingly, we may ask you to stop volunteering.

Sometimes someone will make a good point. If so, keep it in mind for next time. But it’s more likely someone will take issue with something in your first paragraph, not bother reading the rest, and submit a dumb comment that we can all laugh about in the office.

Letters to the editor tend to be more thought out, probably because we actually do require real names, but there’s still no guarantee of quality.

## **Don’t Worry, I Got Your Back**

To make up for all the terrible destructive criticism you’ll get, I’m going to give you the very best constructive criticism I can.

The first piece of advice is forget about having an ego if you want to be a writer. Nobody’s words are holy. If you disagree, search for “Anne Rice Amazon incident.” Your articles will be better after several rounds of edits by different people, and so will mine.

If you ever have questions about edits I make, or you think I misrepresented what you wanted to say, definitely let me know. If you want advice before you’ve finished something on where to go, what angle to take, how to write the conclusion, you’re welcome to send it in a day or two early. What I can’t do is run every change by you

as it happens.

Keep in mind that there are many reasons why we make changes. It might be because a particular sentence really is clumsy or unclear. It might just be that the particular way you phrased something needs to be changed to make it fit on the page. It may well be a compromise between three different editors. Our jobs are to make *The Gateway* as good as possible, and accepting that we’re going to make changes is part of getting your work published.

It can be hard to accept criticism, but it’s the only way to improve. Blind praise helps nobody. If you ever want feedback on a particular article, or if you want to sit down with me and look through a bunch at once, don’t hesitate to let me know. The better you get, the easier it is for me to get your stuff through edits, after all.

## **Rejection**

Sometimes I can’t run a piece. It could be that I got it too late for us to do the work on it that it needs. It could be that you forgot the crucial step of pitching the idea to me first, and somebody else already wrote about that topic. Sometimes the Editor-in-Chief might decide that it’s unsalvageably libellous. Or I may reject something for being racist, sexist, or anything along those lines. I will let you know why it was rejected, but it’s still going to suck for you. All I can say is take the advice and try again.

## **Checklist Time**

If you’re a new writer, you need to get your headbox photo taken, and you have to

sign the volunteer copyright agreement form. Next, here's a handy checklist to get you from a mere University of Alberta student, to a real live published Gateway Opinion Volunteer!

- Come up with a topic.
- Figure out a good angle.
- Pitch the idea.
- Decide on tone and voice.
- Write!

Now check over your article:

- Is the lede interesting?
  - Has your introduction sufficiently set up the situation?
  - Did you remember to separate all the paragraphs?
  - Do the paragraphs flow into each other well?
  - Does your argument contain any logical fallacies?
  - Are there any red squiggly lines in the word processor?
  - Wait, did you remember to set spellcheck to Canadian?
  - Are there any clumsy sentences?
  - Awkward metaphors or similes?
  - Did you repeat any words too closely to each other?
  - Is the punctuation good?
  - Are your jokes funny?
  - Are there any completely redundant sentences or paragraphs?
  - Are you in line with Gateway style?
  - Check the Duck Book if you're unsure.
  - Do you have all the links I'm going to need to fact-check?
  - Are you happy with the article?
- All good? Send it in and relax!

## Resources

### The Duck Book

The bright yellow Duck Book holds the answers to all your questions about the tiny yet significant details of Gateway style. Need to know the specific rules on abbreviations or acronyms, or the difference between an em-dash and an en-dash? The Duck Book holds the answers to all these questions and more. I suggest giving it a once-over to familiarize yourself with some of the rules, and refer back to it whenever you have a question about style.

### The Staff Manual

The Gateway Staff Manual is the official guide to everything we do — including a handy print schedule, introductions to all the editors, their sections and deadlines, the Gateway's policies, ethics and standards, and a whole bunch of other useful stuff you should probably know. Grab a copy from the bookshelf in the couch room and take it home for your reading pleasure.

### Useful Classes

If you're interested in learning different writing techniques, check out the classes offered for the Creative Writing minor. WRITE 298, 398 and 498, the creative non-fiction courses, are of particular interest, and don't require a writing portfolio for admission.

If you're looking to get good at analyzing and making arguments, I'd recommend almost any philosophy course. PHIL 101 and 102 in particular have no prerequisites, and will both teach you the basics of argumentation, the only real difference being the topics covered. PHIL 120 and 125 both deal with logic.

Additionally, higher level philosophy courses often have extremely low prerequisites, so if you're good with arguments and need some 200 level or above arts credits...

### **Blogs, Opinion Columns, and Other Newspapers**

If you want to get a good feel for how to write opinion, one of the best things you can do is read a lot of it. Read the Opinion section in every issue, see what other writers have done well. Check out the opinion columns of other local, and national newspapers, and read blogs by columnists or freelance journalists.

### **Writing Guides**

There are a lot of guides that promise to teach you how to write well. I'd recommend *The Elements of Style*, by Strunk and White. It's not flawless, but much of the advice is good. If you don't have the time to read a whole book, George Orwell's *Politics and the English Language* is a relatively short article that explains how to avoid many kinds of bad writing.

Okay, we're done here. Go write something!



