UNIT-3 : ART OF COLUMN WRITING

UNIT STRUCTURE

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3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- familiarize yourself with different types of columns
- define and explain the distinguishing characteristics of an op-ed and an editorial
- develop the understanding of how to write a column.

3.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit has been titled ‘Art of Column Writing’. Let us begin by defining what a ‘column’ is. In its simplest sense, column is a vertical division of a page or text. It could be the page of a newspaper or a magazine. Generally, a standard size newspaper is divided into five to eight columns while a magazine page may be divided into two or three columns.

In the context of journalism, a ‘column’ refers to a recurring piece or an article in a newspaper, magazine or other publication, where a writer, usually an authority or expert, expresses his or her own opinion in the space allotted to him by the newspaper organisation.. From the word ‘column’ comes the

word 'columnist' who is a regular writer of a particular column of a particular publication. The columnist usually writes periodically on the same theme of his/her expertise or expresses his/her personal opinion or ideas on different timely and relevant issues and events, mostly of current importance.

The column is a strong personal reflection of the columnist and tells a lot about the author's personality. A column is both generalised and specialised writing, which may entail the elucidation or expression of the policy of the newspaper, or it may be based on the independent thinking of an individual. Columns are published with the real names of the writers or under pseudonyms in some cases. Columns are considered to be the most powerful medium of any newspaper, next to news. Columns reflect humour or moods or sentiments of the author.

3.3 TYPES OF COLUMNS

Having learnt about what a column is, let us now move on to know about the different types of columns. Just like different types of news stories, columns can be classified into several different types too. Some of the most common and popular types of columns are discussed here.

Reporting-in-Depth Columns

In this types of columns, the columnist traces down the background, offers perspectives and gives his/her personal interpretation of various happenings, the bases of which are already reported in hard news. In these columns, current news events are related to the past and also to the future.

Advice Column or Question/Answer Column

The advice column comes in the question and answer format. A reader (anonymous in most cases) writes a question to the expert columnist and the columnist offers his/her advice or solution in the answer. These columns could range from being based on the themes of medical issues, cooking tips, beauty care and personal issues to career guidance, child care and household maintenance.

Specialized Columns

These types of columns are generally limited and confined to a single subject or topic, with the underlying purpose to render better and detailed service to the readers seeking out information on those particular themes. In each instalment, a new issue or aspect of the same subject matter is discussed in detail. It may be confined to a single department of life or learning. Under specialized columns are included columns like, 'legal column', 'religious column', astrology or palmistry column', 'fashion column', 'sports column', 'medical column', 'women's column', 'children's column' and others.

Political Columns

These are columns that usually provide partisan viewpoints and arguments, as well as analysis of political news. Political columnists often use wit and satire to criticize politicians or certain policies of the government.

Humour Columns

In this type of column, the columnist tries to find the humorous aspect in life and writes an article that will amuse readers. They are designed to inform the readership and tickle their funny bones at the same time. Humour columnists explore current events with wit, playfulness and levity, providing comic relief from hard news. Perhaps more than other columnists, humorists are known for their distinct voice and personality, and for exploring difficult issues in funny ways.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1 : What is a column?

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Q.2 : What are specialized columns?

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Q.3 : What are the most common types of columns?

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3.4 OP-ED AND EDITORIAL

An **op-ed** piece derives its name from originally having appeared opposite the editorial page in a newspaper. Today, the term is used more widely to represent a column that represents the strong, informed, and focused opinion of the writer on an issue of relevance to a targeted audience. Many also interpret 'op-ed' as 'opinion editorial'.

However, in most cases, the author of the op-ed is someone who is not affiliated with the editorial board of the publication house.



LET US KNOW

Herbert Bayard Swope of *The New York Evening World* was the first editor to create space for the op-ed page in 1921 on realising that the page opposite the editorials was "a catchall for book reviews, society boilerplate, and obituaries". But Swope included only opinions by employees of his newspaper, leaving the "modern" op-ed page to be developed in 1970 under the direction of *The New York Times* editor, John B. Oakes. The first op-ed page of *The New York Times* appeared on 21 September 1970.

An **Editorial**, on the other hand is the column featuring the lead opinion piece published on the editorial page under the mast head of the newspaper

or magazine written by the editor himself or by another member of his team. Editorials are usually supposed to reflect the opinion of the periodical. It is considered to be the "show-window" of the newspaper and is subjective in nature, in contrast to the other news items which are supposed to be objective and unbiased.

As the leading and most important article of the newspaper, editorials are the paper's own comments on important issues of the day. Editorial is the only type of writing in which the newspaper organization can give its own comment. Features and columns are also opinion based, but they reflect the opinions of the authors only, and not that of the publication house. But in the editorial, comments are considered as that of the new/paper organization.

The editorials of a good newspaper are always interesting. They are full of life and attract our attention. The leading editorial article should be thought provoking and instead of being partisan they should be independent and full of inspiration for all the readers.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.4 : What is an 'op-ed'? Where does the 'op-ed' derive its name from?

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Q.5: What is an editorial?

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Q.6: The leading editorial article should be _____ and instead of being _____ they should be independent and full of _____ for all the readers.

Q.7: An Editorial is considered to be the _____ of the newspaper and is subjective in nature.

3.5 STEPS TO BE FOLLOWED WHILE WRITING A COLUMN

So far, you have been learning about columns, the different types of columns and the distinction between them. Now, if you want to write a column yourself, how would you do it?

Opinion columns are wonderful genres that allow us to speak out on issues that we feel strongly about. However, it is not enough to simply state your opinion. For a writer, it is equally important that we follow some guidelines so that our opinion is heard and considered. While it may seem straightforward, there are a lot of important things to remember when producing a column. Being a columnist carries with it the responsibility of being supportive of your sources, getting the facts straight, and not entangling yourself in conflicts of interest. Let us take a look at the steps and guidelines to be followed while writing a column.

Choose a relevant and interesting topic

If you have the freedom to choose the topic of your column, then choosing the right topic is the most important step. Be conscious of what is fashionable, topical; currently relevant and likely to interest readers and also give thoughts to which topic would you be most comfortable writing. Also remember to decide your topic and the way to write your column, keeping in mind your targeted group of readers.

Be clear about what you want to express

Once you have found the topic to write about in your column, you must have a clear idea in your mind regarding what you are going to put down in words. You must have clarity in your thoughts about the flow of the column as well as what you wish to convey through it.

Use simple and lucid language

The column must be written in simple yet a lucid language so that what you write becomes not only easy to understand but also touches the hearts

of your readers. It is important to connect emotionally with your readers so as to persuade, engender trust, enlighten people, clarify issues, and to make what you write interesting. Avoid unnecessary dragging and come to the point quickly, keeping the write-up short and simple.

Analyse thoroughly

You will have to apply your analytical skills and try to present both sides of a story rather than simply remaining captured by your own perspective of an issue. Good journalism is objective and doesn't seek to take sides but it also offers balance to ensure that not only one side of the story is presented. Provide a solution instead of just raising an issue. Have the conviction to suggest a solution or a range of them. Columns that criticize certain issues but offer no solutions are pointless because readers want to gain insight and answers from the column.

Maintain accuracy

While writing your column, you are likely to provide some data or information which might be crucial or of great importance to the readers. You must make sure that the information is correct as your readers will consider the data provided by you as reliable. The same holds applicable to quoting what other people said or while writing the name of a person or an organisation.

Mention sources clearly

It is always advisable to clearly mention the source when you are presenting an opinion/argument which is not originally yours, so as to avoid conflict or controversy. By announcing to the reader the reason why the person you're quoting has authority to speak on the matter, the reader is immediately able to assess the reliability or trustworthiness of that person's statement. In case you (or your source) wish to protect their identity, you should mention the same in a disclaimer.

Be original

As already mentioned in the previous sections, a column is reflective of the writer's personality. Hence, it is very important to keep your thoughts original and not drawn or copied from other sources. Whatever you quote from other sources, remember to acknowledge those sources properly.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.8 Fill in the blanks :

a. Once you have found the topic to write about in your column, you must have a _____ in your mind regarding what you are going to put down in words.

b. The column must be written in _____ yet a _____ language so that what you write becomes not only easy to understand but also touches the hearts of your readers.

c. Good journalism is _____ and doesn't seek to take sides but it also offers _____ to ensure that not only one side of the story is presented.

d. It is always advisable to clearly mention the _____ when you are presenting an opinion/argument which is not originally yours, so as to avoid _____ or _____.

Other important additional tips for column writing are:

1. The writer's tone of writing should be consistent with the topic selected.
2. He/she should project views that are consistent with his earlier views.
3. A good author always prefers to have three drafts of his own writing for precision in revision and editing.
4. The writing should begin with a strong verb; contain punch to attract the readers.

   Some columnists employ alliteration, which makes the writing attractive.
5. Rules of good writing should be followed, but can be ignored if needed.
6. Repeat when required, so also the use of hyperbole.
7. A columnist should avoid rambling and also clichés.

8. He/she should use familiar words, not the uncommon ones.
9. The columnist should not sound bemoaning every incident in the world.
10. A columnist should take into account the purpose of writing and the audience/readers while deciding the content and the structure of his writing.



3.6 LET US SUM UP

Let us sum up our unit on the art of column writing with the following points:

- In the context of journalism, a 'column' refers to a recurring piece or an article in a newspaper, magazine or other publication, where a writer, usually an authority or expert, expresses his or her own opinion in the space allotted to him by the newspaper organisation.
- The column is a strong personal reflection of the columnist and tells a lot about the author's personality. A column is both generalised and specialised writing, which may entail the elucidation or expression of the policy of the newspaper, or it may be based on the independent thinking of an individual.
- Just like different types of news stories, columns can be classified into several different types too. Some of the most common and popular types of columns are Reporting-in-Depth Columns, Advice or Question-Answer Columns, Specialised Columns, Political Columns and Humour Columns.
- An **op-ed** is a column that represents the strong, informed, and focused opinion of the writer on an issue of relevance to a targeted audience. It derives its name from originally having appeared opposite the editorial page in a newspaper. Many also interpret 'op-ed' as 'opinion editorial'.
- An **Editorial** is the column featuring the lead opinion piece published on the editorial page under the mast head of the newspaper or magazine written by the editor himself or by another member of his team.
- While it may seem straightforward, there are a lot of important things to remember when producing a column. Being a columnist carries with it

the responsibility of being supportive of your sources, getting the facts straight, and not entangling yourself in conflicts of interest.



3.7 FURTHER READING

1. Kamath, M.V, The Journalist's Handbook New Delhi : Vikas Publishing House.



3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q.No 1 : In the context of journalism, a 'column' refers to a recurring piece or an article in a newspaper, magazine or other publication, where a writer, usually an authority or expert, expresses his or her own opinion in the space allotted to him by the newspaper organisation.

Ans to Q. No 2 : Specialized columns are generally limited and confined to a single subject or topic, with the underlying purpose to render better and detailed service to the readers seeking out information on those particular themes. In each instalment, a new issue or aspect of the same subject matter is discussed in details. It may be confined to a single department of life or learning. Under specialized columns are included columns like, 'legal column', 'religious column', astrology or palmistry column', 'fashion column', 'sports column', 'medical column', 'women's column', 'children's column' and others.

Ans to Q.No 3 : Just like different types of news stories, columns can be classified into several different types too. Some of the most common and popular types of columns are Reporting-in-Depth Columns, Advice or Question-Answer Columns, Specialised Columns, Political Columns and Humour Columns.

Ans to Q. No 4 : An **op-ed** is a column that represents the strong, informed, and focused opinion of the writer on an issue of relevance to a targeted audience. It derives its name from originally having appeared opposite the editorial page in a newspaper. Many also interpret 'op-ed' as 'opinion editorial'.

Ans to Q.No 5 : An **Editorial** is the column featuring the lead opinion piece published on the editorial page under the mast head of the newspaper or magazine written by the editor himself or by another member of his team. Editorials are usually supposed to reflect the opinion of the periodical. It is considered to be the "show-window" of the newspaper and is subjective in nature, in contrast to the other news items which are supposed to be objective and unbiased.

Ans to Q. No 6 : The leading editorial article should be thought provoking and instead of being partisan they should be independent and full of inspiration for all the readers.

Ans to Q. No 7 : An editorial is considered to be the show-window of the newspaper and is subjective in nature.

Ans to Q.No 8 :

a. Once you have found the topic to write about in your column, you must have a clear idea in your mind regarding what you are going to put down in words.
b. The column must be written in simple yet a lucid language so that what you write becomes not only easy to understand but also touches the hearts of your readers.
c. Good journalism is objective and doesn't seek to take sides but it also offers balance to ensure that not only one side of the story is presented.
d. It is always advisable to clearly mention the source when you are presenting an opinion/argument which is not originally yours, so as to avoid conflict or controversy.



3.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very Short Questions

Q.1 : What are humour columns?

Q.2 : What is the difference between op-ed and editorial?

B. Short questions (Answer each question in about 150 words):

Q.1 : What is a column? What are the characteristics of a column?

Q.2 : What are the different types of columns? Describe them in brief.

Q.3 : What is the difference between an op-ed and an editorial?

C. Long questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words):

Q.1 : What are the steps to be followed while writing a column?

Q.2 :What additional tips are given to column writers?