



How to Communicate Effectively in Writing **A Collection of Tips**

Tip 1:

Don't try too much. An op-ed is an extraordinarily small space to make a good argument, so pick a narrow topic. Not "abortion," but one particular aspect of the debate (e.g., what science does or doesn't contribute). Not marriage, but, say, the logical-connection-to-polyamory objection, or the social science on why moms and dads are both necessary.

Tip 2:

Avoid jargon wherever possible, and define it where you must use it. People don't understand terms like "one-flesh union" and "disintegrating" (in the sense that natural law theory says sodomy is "disintegrating") and "reproductive-type act." They will understand the concepts if you explain those concepts, but do so in simple, clear, everyday language. Make it so that a 10th grader could understand it.

Tip 3:

Be uncompromisingly fair, but don't spend too much time celebrating explicitly your own civility and love of dialogue. That ends up looking dishonest, and it's cheesy and wasteful of space.

Tip 4:

Use some humor (if it's good) and sass (if it isn't cutting). Have personality and voice when you're talking or writing about really heavy and serious issues that people feel so fired up about one way or another.

Tip 5:

Never, ever apologize for your views. Don't start on the defensive, anticipating too much people's accusations of bigotry. Go immediately on the offense. Be proud and confident and cheerful about your views if that's what you are. If you really believe that charity and justice require them, then don't, in an effort to seem thoughtful to peers who think you're crazy, try to appear concerned or nervous about the accusations of bigotry and insanity.

Tip 6:

Do not rely on very circumstantial or insignificant considerations. This seems obvious, but some specific examples may clarify what I'm getting at. Don't argue for the



immorality of some act by trying to show that it sometimes makes people *feel* bad or that it makes life at all more difficult for someone. Sex isn't immoral because it releases oxytocin, which makes us bond with our partner. It isn't immoral because sexually active couples who break up feel worse than sexually abstinent couples who do. These are all practical considerations against sex, or at least for limiting sex; if you present them at all, make it clear that you're aware of how far they go and what they don't prove. To make the arguments about morality, you have to appeal to moral principles.

Tip 7:

The best way to defend moral principles that you need for your argument, is to show your reader or interlocutor that he shares those principles and applies them in other cases. For example, if you can show that sexual exclusivity within marriage doesn't make sense unless abstinence before marriage is morally required, that's good: most people agree with the moral norm against adultery, so any connection you can draw between that and fornication will pack a punch.

Tip 8:

Respond forcefully and quickly to high-profile criticisms; it gets you lots of press, shows your courage and pride in your unpopular views, and gives people a chance to hear "the other side," which so many would otherwise never hear.

Tip 9:

Don't just respond to criticisms. Put other groups on the defensive--in a civil and intellectually honest and respectable way, of course. If you find an inconsistency in the positions of another group dedicated to similar issues, or in a popular position even if it isn't advocated by a campus group, pick on that. Expose the contradictions and invite responses.

Tip 10:

Always, always, always have one or two people look at something before you print it, preferably someone who agrees with you and someone who does not, but who likes you. (If you get too many more than two people to edit something, its unity of style and punch will probably suffer.)

Tip 11:

Scrupulously avoid grammatical errors, misspellings, and incorrect word choice. Give your enemies no fodder for ridiculing or patronizing you.

Tip 12:

Ignore 90% of all anonymous comments posted on your online pieces. Anonymous online comments are the vilest institution ever.



Tip 13:

Be very careful about personal testimony as a form of persuasion. It's much riskier than more abstract arguments. It exposes you to deeper and more perverse ridicule, could be unseemly in what it reveals, is often unconvincing because of the differences between any two people's experiences, which could make one person's seem irrelevant to the other's, etc. There might be a place for this, but it's a limited one.

Tip 14:

Be on the lookout for, and call out, double standards in other people's treatments of your views or your advocacy. In liberal, pluralistic democracies, and in universities which try to emulate them, every respectful person deserves a seat at the table. If you but not other ideologically oriented student groups are being excluded from some function or otherwise treated differently, call the offenders out on it. They will often be blind--utterly blind--to what they're doing, so they may be acting in good faith and ready to correct themselves when you open their eyes.

Tip 15:

Never ever play the victim. Never ask for special treatment, complain about being disregarded or ridiculed, etc. Be cheerful and determined; play offense and defense. Just don't worry about yourself too much. Worry about the cause you're defending.