How to write a column for a newspaper

Rural papers often struggle to find enough news of local interest to fill the available space. Guest columnists are one of the ways they often like to fill up some space. (This is especially true for columnists they don’t have to pay!) Meet with the editor of your newspaper and ask if you can provide a regular column, possibly once a month, or an occasional column on subjects of interest.

Ask your task force members, staff and other volunteers to brainstorm potential topics or themes for columns. Some ideas include:

- How you work with other organizations in the community
- Why endowment funds are important
- Nonprofit success stories (featuring your grantees)
- Upcoming events
- Profiles of donors
- Profiles of scholarship recipients
- Profiles of board members
- Interviews with board members
- Interviews with grantees
- How to give
- Tax benefits of giving to a community foundation
- Planned giving

Just as you don’t need to be a professional reporter to write a news release, you don’t have to be a national columnist to write an interesting and informative column that will communicate your message and convey important information about your community foundation or fund. Unlike a news release, you don’t need to put all your key information in the lead sentence or paragraph of a column. You can lead up to it. But, as you begin writing, write a summary sentence for yourself that states the goal of the column, then outline the most important points you wish to make. This helps keep you on track as you write.

Whatever the topic, always focus somewhere in the column on how your community foundation or fund benefits the community at large. Because the column limit is usually 500–800 words, clear, concise writing is a necessity. Make your column lively, and always use the active voice. Use the same rules for physical appearance that you use for your news release. Proofread your copy carefully and make sure you meet the newspaper’s deadline.

**Upcoming events.** If you are writing the column about an upcoming event, do so as you are beginning your event planning, so that you can include in the column a request for more volunteers, partners or community resources.
**Guest writers.** While one person needs to be responsible for ensuring that a column is written and sent to the newspaper on schedule, guest columnists are a good way to gain fresh insights and reader interest. Guests could include a grantee, a scholarship recipient, a board member, a professional advisor or a donor.