

How to Write a Compelling Op-Ed about Front-of-Package Nutrition Labeling

What is an op-ed?

An op-ed is a short opinion article in a news publication, often submitted by a thought leader or member of the general public, expressing a clear point of view on a timely issue of interest to the publication's readership. It is written in clear, plain and non-academic language.

Why write an op-ed about front-of-package nutrition labeling (FOPNL)?

Public health advocates are optimistic that FOPNL will soon appear on all packaged foods sold in the United States. Writing an op-ed can inform your community about this forthcoming change, why it's happening, how it may affect them, and what's exciting about it. This is particularly important since the food industry is pushing back hard against mandatory FOPNL. Op-eds from public health advocates in local and regional news publications can convey to the public and to federal policymakers that FOPNL has broad support across the nation from trusted professionals whose motivation is to promote health and well-being.

How can you craft a compelling op-ed about FOPNL?

Op-eds about FOPNL can convey the local importance of this federal policy by describing personal experiences or challenges with understanding food labels, sharing local diet-related chronic disease statistics, noting local places where people will start to see FOPNL, and emphasizing the utility of FOPNL for specific populations (*e.g.*, parents, children, and older adults). Keep it simple. Explain technical terms if you must use them. Keep sentences short. Use hyperlinks for citations. Remember, people are moved by stories, not just facts, so include both. Compelling stories demonstrate why the writer is passionate about FOPNL and how it will impact their life. See the outline below for more tips and examples.

When should you write an op-ed about FOPNL?

Any time is a great time to write an op-ed about FOPNL, and the content can be tailored to the moment. Tying your op-ed to a current event or news item can increase the chances it will be published. Try considering the season— can you tie it to Halloween candy? Labor Day BBQs? Thanksgiving cooking?

If you write your op-ed before FDA makes a public proposal, you can call on FDA to prioritize FOPNL and issue regulations as soon as possible. If you write your op-ed after FDA issues a "proposed rule," you can comment on what excites you about the proposal. If your op-ed comes after FDA issues final regulations, you can write about the momentous change coming to grocery store shelves. Each of these stages is important for public education and advocacy.

As of August 2024, FDA's proposed rule on FOPNL is scheduled for release in October 2024. However, regulatory timelines often change. To inquire about the status of FDA's rulemaking, feel free to contact policy@cspinet.org.

Op-Ed Outline and Examples

Title

Offer a catchy title designed to draw potential readers (but know that the news publication may suggest a different title).

- *“The Time is Ripe to Transform Food Labels”¹*
- *“These Countries are Doing Nutrition Labels the Right Way”²*
- *“How to Help Americans Eat Less Junk Food”³*

Opening Paragraph(s)

Set the scene and get your readers’ attention. Consider that some readers may only read this opening.

“The system of food labeling in the United States does not make it easy for consumers trying to assess the nutritional value of the foods they buy. Now, the Food and Drug Administration can do something about it.

Briefly describe the issue, make it clear why the reader should care, and clearly state your perspective (what should be done about the issue?).

More than 40 countries have adopted easy-to-understand, front-of-package nutrition information showing, at a glance, which foods are more — or less — healthful. Thus far, the United States has not required front-of-package labeling [...] The only thing standing in the way: the food industry.”²

A surprising fact, intriguing question, story, or metaphor can serve as a great hook.

Concise ways to explain FOPNL

- Labels required on the front of packaged foods to give consumers basic nutrition information that is easy to understand and allows them to quickly compare different products.
- Mandatory labels that will appear on any food containing high levels of nutrients that are commonly overconsumed and linked to adverse health outcomes (*i.e.*, sodium, added sugar, and saturated fat)

Body Paragraphs

Describe the issue (the problem) in greater detail.

“Good nutrition starts with education. Appearing on more than 6.5 billion products, the current Nutrition Facts label includes the number of calories and servings for a given product, specific nutrients, and how much those nutrients contribute to an overall daily diet. People who use the label buy more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains — and fewer sugary drinks — compared to those who don’t. [...]

Develop your argument with evidence and concrete examples (how will your proposed solution address the issue you described?).

Include personal or professional stories or local examples to bring the issue to life.

The problem is that fewer than 1/3 of consumers report using it. Those who do tend to be white, with higher incomes and more education; among its most infrequent users are parents of young children. Many people — including Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Commissioner Robert Califf — don’t pay much attention to it for a simple reason: it appears on the back of packages, not the front.”⁴

Express why you believe what you believe.

Tie each idea back to your main argument.

Identify and refute 1-2 counterarguments.

For examples of how to use personal stories, check out these fabulous op-eds by researcher Lindsey Smith Taillie in [The Guardian](#)⁵ and the [Wall Street Journal](#).⁶

For examples of common arguments against FOPNL and evidence-based rebuttals, check out this [CSPI factsheet](#).

Evidence-based arguments in favor of FOPNL

- **FOPNL can help address our public health crisis.** Excess consumption of sodium, sugar, and saturated fat is linked to higher risk of hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease. These are leading causes of death in our community. *[include local chronic disease statistics here]* Research shows that FOPNL can [help people make healthier choices](#) and [spurs product reformulation](#), leading to a healthier food supply for all.
- **FOPNL can make nutrition information more accessible.** Few U.S. adults report regularly [using the Nutrition Facts](#) panel when deciding to buy a food, especially those with lower household income, educational attainment, and English proficiency. *[include local demographic statistics here]* Studies from [Ecuador](#) and [Chile](#) found that FOPNL was useful for consumers across levels of education and income, suggesting FOPNL may make nutrition information more accessible and benefit our community even more than previous nutrition labeling initiatives.
- **FOPNL will help people make more informed choices.** Despite the availability of the Nutrition Facts Panel, many consumers [struggle to understand](#) what the information provided means and how it relates to their health. People often end up [relying on marketing claims](#) telling them when foods are “natural,” contain “real” ingredients, or are high in vitamins, minerals, protein, and fiber. FOPNL can help consumers make informed choices by providing simple, factual disclosures highlighting when foods have high amounts of sodium, saturated fat, and/or added sugars.

Conclusion

Reiterate your main point and offer a final call to action or takeaway message.

Craft a memorable final sentence that will stick in your readers’ minds.

“To be clear, this is just one of many steps toward providing all Americans with a healthy diet. But intuitive front-of-package labeling is one of the best levers available to policymakers, and it is already working elsewhere. It can work here, too.”³

Brief Bio

Include a 1-2 sentence bio for each author that establishes their credibility with the editor and that could be used to identify authors in the publication.

Jim Krieger is a physician and Professor Emeritus at the University of Washington. His work focuses on policies that support good nutrition.

Getting Your Op-Ed Published

- Select a news publication and review their guidelines for op-ed submissions (including the word limit, usually 600-800 words).
- Send a short pitch email (see model) and follow up if you don’t hear back (the publication’s website will have contact info for the editor or op-ed staff).
- If rejected, ask the editor if they’re willing to discuss further. Otherwise, try another news outlet.

Model Pitch Email

Subject line: [Main issue] + [newsworthiness]

Email body:

Hello [editor’s name],

I am [name] [relevant role/credentials]. I am submitting an op-ed on [main issue] with crucial information for your readers. In my piece I explain [main point]. This is timely because [newsworthiness].

[paste your op-ed]

Sincerely,

[your name(s), contact information, and ways to reach you after hours]

Source: Berkeley Media Studies Group

Helpful Resources

Op-eds writing resources

- Worksheet: Crafting Effective Op-Eds, Berkeley Media Studies Group: <https://www.bmsg.org/resources/publications/worksheet-crafting-effective-op-eds/>
- MIT Broad Research Communication Lab's CommKit: <https://mitcommlab.mit.edu/broad/commkit/op-ed/>
- Healthy Eating Research Webinar and Slides on Writing Effective Op-Eds: <https://healthyeatingresearch.org/2023/09/writing-effective-op-eds-a-training-for-researchers/> (geared toward researchers but helpful for everyone!)

FOPNL resources

- FDA Webpage on FOPNL: <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-labeling-nutrition/front-package-nutrition-labeling>
- CSPI factsheet summarizing the scientific evidence supporting FOPNL: <https://www.cspinet.org/resource/front-package-nutrition-labeling>
- CSPI factsheet summarizing the food industry's false claims about FOPNL (with rebuttal arguments): <https://www.cspinet.org/resource/food-industrys-false-claims-about-front-package-nutrition-labeling-fact-sheet>
- Review article by Roberto et al. describing the influence of FOPNL on consumer behavior and product reformulation: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34339293/>
- Map of FOPNL policies around the world: <https://www.globalfoodresearchprogram.org/resource/front-of-package-label-maps/>

Previous op-eds on FOPNL by researchers and public health advocates

1. <https://thehill.com/opinion/healthcare/3986449-the-time-is-ripe-to-transform-food-labels/>
2. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/03/06/food-labels-nutrition-fda/>
3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/30/opinion/food-warning-labels-ultra-processed-food.html>
4. <https://www.agri-pulse.com/articles/20955-opinion-why-the-food-industry-should-welcome-front-of-pack-nutrition-labeling>
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/23/ultra-processed-foods-time-scarcity>
6. <https://www.wsj.com/health/wellness/big-bold-warning-labels-can-steer-people-away-from-junk-food-d81e0704>