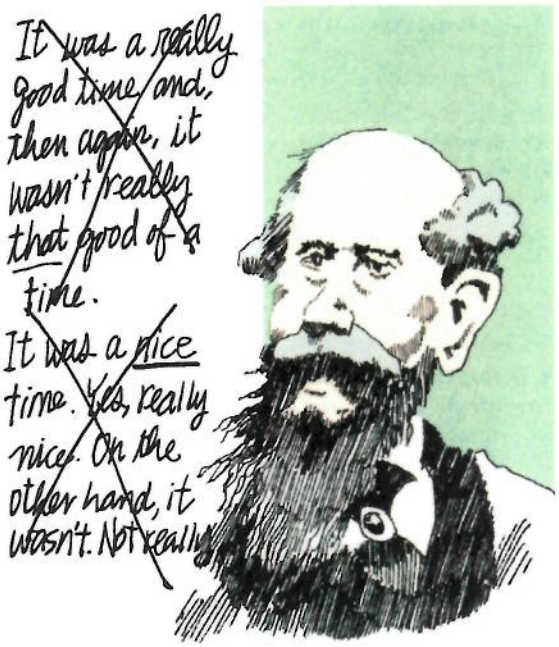
Writing basic news leads

It's the essence of journalism: the key facts summarized in a concise way.

Some journalism teachers insist that a story's lead (or "lede") must be *just one paragraph.* And that paragraph must use *just one sentence.* And that sentence must be *30 words or less.* And if you violate this formula, readers will be alarmed by your incompetence.



Fortunately — or unfortunately — it's not that simple. As we'll see in the pages ahead, you have many, many options for writing smart, engaging leads.

Let's begin by focusing on the most fundamental option: the basic news lead for inverted-pyramid stories. It's the style of newswriting that comes closest to using a dependable formula. And here's the good news: If you can master the process of writing leads — identifying key facts and expressing them concisely — you'll have a solid command of the craft of journalism.

Still, learning to write even the simplest leads takes time and practice. For many writers, just *starting* the story is the most agonizing, time-consuming part of the job. But that's why they pay reporters the big bucks. So start honing your speed and skill now.

HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE NEWS LEAD

1 COLLECT ALL YOUR FACTS

This is essential, for two reasons:

- If you don't know the whole story, your lead can't accurately summarize what's going on.
- The more you know about the story, the easier it will be for you to sum it up and boil it down.

2 SUM IT UP, BOIL IT DOWN

If you had just 10 seconds to shout this story over a cell phone with dying batteries, what would you say? If it helps you organize your thinking, jot down the five W's in a list, like so:

WHO: Three Mudflap passengers were injured.
WHAT: A private plane crashed.
WHEN: Friday night, 9:12 p.m.
WHERE: The Mudflap River behind Mudflap Airport.
WHY: A bolt of lightning struck the plane, killing the engine.

3 PRIORITIZE THE FIVE W's

The lead needs to contain the facts that are most important — and *only* those facts that are most important. So evaluate each of the five W's. Ask yourself: Which facts must be in the lead? Which can wait a paragraph or two? And which of the key facts deserves to start the first sentence?

4 RETHINK, REVISE, REWRITE

Write a first draft, even if it's not perfect, just to get things rolling. Then ask yourself:

Is it clear? Are the key points easy to grasp? Is the wording awkward in any way?
Is it active? Have you used a strong subject-verb-object sentence structure?
Is it wordy? Do readers trip over any unnecessary adjectives or phrases?
Is it compelling? Will it grab readers and keep them interested?

UH-OH. HERE'S WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU "BURY THE LEAD"

Every so often, a surly editor may tell you to rework a story because you *buried the lead.* Which means, basically: You blew it. You thought *that thing* was the most important part of the story, but it's actually *this thing* — the news you buried down in the twelfth paragraph. So fix it, you knucklehead.

Here's a memorable example of a buried lead that actually ran in a New Jersey paper a half-century ago. The editors had recruited secretaries from local organizations to report on their groups' activities. But because these women weren't trained reporters, they didn't know how to write news stories — or more importantly, how to write news *leads.* So they ended up with this:

The Parent-Teacher Association of Cornelis Banta School held its regular monthly meeting Tuesday evening in the school cafeteria, for the election of officers for the coming year, with Mrs. Noah ten Floed, president, in the chair. The nominating committee proposed Mrs. Douwe Taleran for president, Mrs. David Demarest for vice president, and Mrs. Laurens van Boschkerken for secretary-treasurer. It was moved and seconded that the nominations be closed.

Mrs. Gianello Venutoleri arose and said that she wanted to nominate Mrs. Nuovo Cittadino, Mrs. Giuseppe Soffiate, and Mrs. Salvatore dal Vapore. Mrs. ten Floed ruled Mrs. Venutoleri out of order. Mrs. Venutoleri appealed to the parliamentarian, Miss Sarah Kierstad, who sustained the chair.

Mrs. Venutoleri took a small automatic pistol from her handbag and shot Mrs. ten Floed between the eyes. Constable Abraham Brinkerhoff came and escorted Mrs. Venutoleri to the county jail. The body of Mrs. ten Floed was removed to Van Emburgh's Funeral Parlor.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned for refreshments, which were served by Mrs. Adrian Blauvelt's committee. The next meeting will be held on Friday evening, Sept. 10, for the installation of officers.

A PLANE CRASHES. WHICH LEADS ARE BEST (OR WORST)?

Writing leads is often a process of trial and error. You try stacking different facts in different ways until you find the most concise, effective combination.

Let's use that plane crash (from Tip #2 at left) as an example. You work for a weekly paper near the airport. What's the best lead for that news story? Here are some of the solutions you might create as you emphasize each of the five W's:

LEADING WITH THE WHO

In news stories about accidents or disasters, leads often begin by stating the number of deaths or injuries. It may seem morbid, but it helps readers gauge the seriousness of the event. So let's try that:

> Clark Barr, 45, Leah Tard, 42, and Eileen Dover, 17, of Hicksville, were injured when a bolt of lightning struck their private plane, a Cessna 812, at 9:12 p.m. Friday. Barr suffered a fractured leg, Tard cracked several of her ribs, and Dover, who remains in intensive care at Mudflap Hospital, broke both her wrists and ankles after nearly drowning in the river after the plane crashed.

Is this overkill? Yes. There's *way* too much detail too soon. Readers' eyes will glaze over as they try to digest all those facts. The lead should summarize, not itemize; even the names of the victims should wait a paragraph or two. One exception: a recognizable name can leap to the lead if that person is newsworthy —

> Hicksville mayor Clark Barr and two other passengers were injured Friday night when their private plane crashed into the river behind Mudflap Airport after being struck by lightning.

— but ordinarily, nonrecognizable names don't belong in the lead. Besides, that paragraph is still too wordy. Can it be trimmed even more? How about this:

> Three people were injured Friday when a plane crashed at Mudflap Airport.

It's shorter, yes. But now it's too short. There's just not enough information. It's vague. Dull. Undramatic. We need a few more details — but not *too* many — to tell the story and capture some of the drama:

> Three passengers were injured Friday when lightning struck their private plane, plunging them into the river behind Mudflap Airport.

Success! This lead gets the job done. It emphasizes the "who" (the three injured passengers) and conveys just enough of the key facts without being too wordy.

LEADING WITH THE WHAT

There are three "whats" in this story: the plane, the crash, the lightning. Which "what" is most leadworthy? Let's begin with an obvious but *bad* idea:

> There was an accident at Mudflap Airport Friday when a plane crashed after being struck by lightning, resulting in injuries to three passengers.

Dull? Yes. Why? Beginning a lead with a tired phrase like "there was" or "it is" makes the sentence weak and uninspired. It's almost like we're *backing into* the story. Better to use a more specific noun, like:

> A private plane crashed at Mudflap Airport Friday after being struck by lightning. Three passengers were injured.

Not bad. But "a private plane" isn't the most exciting phrase to start the lead with. (*"A hot-air balloon shaped like SpongeBob SquarePants"* — now, *there's* a phrase that would grab readers' attention.)

Notice, too, how that lead uses two sentences. That's acceptable. There's no rule that requires a lead to be only one sentence. BUT if you can write a single clear, compact sentence, do it. Let's try again:

> A private plane was struck by lightning and crashed at Mudflap Airport Friday, injuring three passengers.

This lead has a new problem. Know the difference between active and passive voice? **Active voice** uses strong subject-verb-object phrasing: *"lightning struck a plane."* **Passive voice** uses weaker phrasing: *"A plane was struck by lightning."* Good writers avoid the passive voice, especially in leads, because it lacks punch. Train yourself to recognize and avoid passive phrasing, which means rewriting the lead like this:

> A bolt of lightning struck a private plane as it landed at Mudflap Airport Friday, causing a crash that injured three passengers.

Good. We're using the strongest "what" to start the lead. We're using active voice. We're supplying enough of the key facts without getting too wordy.

LEADING WITH THE WHEN

The plane crashed on a Friday, but does that timing have any significance? No. The "when" is not a crucial part of this story. (In fact, do we even have to specify it was Friday *night*?). Thus, this lead —

> On Friday night, three passengers were injured when their private plane crashed at Mudflap Airport after being struck by lightning.

— is a bit weak. Like that first "what" lead at left, it backs into the story, which often happens when you begin the lead with a prepositional phrase.

Now, suppose it had been a tragic week at Mudflap Airport. You *might*, in that case, call attention to that fact by crafting a "when" lead like this:

> For the third time this week, a private plane crashed at Mudflap Airport. On Friday, three passengers were injured after their plane was struck by lightning.

But that's not the case. So that's not our lead.

LEADING WITH THE WHERE

How important is the "where" of this story? Is it more significant than the crash or the injuries?

> At Mudflap Airport, three passengers were injured Friday when their private plane crashed into the river after being struck by lightning.

No. The "where" is crucial, but it's just not the juiciest fact. (Plus, we're assuming that Mudflap is nearby. If we lived farther away, we might also need to add more geographic detail, like what *state* Mudflap is in.)

LEADING WITH THE WHY

What caused this crash? Lightning hit the plane and killed the engine. Our story will go into greater detail, but a lead like this gives readers a quick grasp of what went wrong. So this "what" lead is also a good "why" lead.

SO WHICH LEAD IS BEST? Most reporters (and editors) would choose either that final "who" lead or that final "what" lead. Both are effective. Which do you prefer?

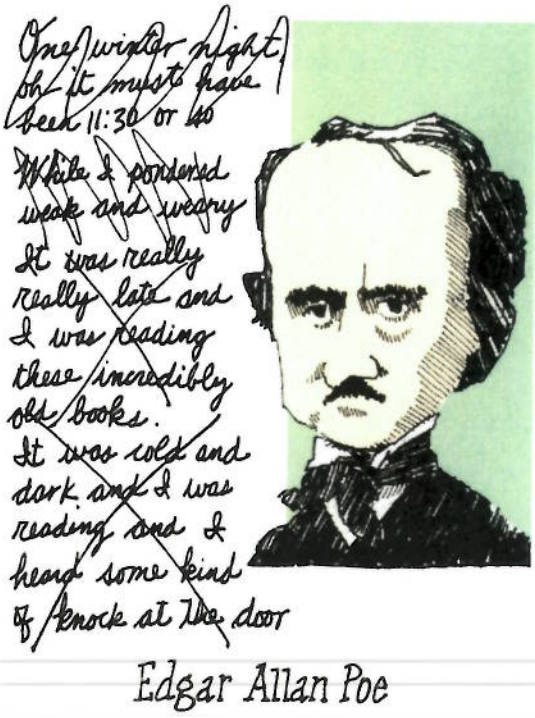
READY TO TRY WRITING SOME LEADS? **TEST YOURSELF** ▶ 64

Beyond the basic news lead

It's not mandatory that you begin every story with a summary of key facts.

As we've explained, for most breaking news events, you need leads that are factual and concise. You need leads that summarize the *who-what-when-where-why*. And being able to produce solid news leads on deadline is one of the most valuable skills a reporter can possess.

But not every story is a timely news event. Some stories explore social issues. Some profile interesting people. Some provide previews of coming attractions.



And for those, a basic news lead may be too dull and dry. You may need something livelier, snappier, more creative, a lead that doesn't just *summarize*, but amuses. Astonishes. Intrigues.

Now, it's impossible to specify *what* kind of story requires *what* kind of lead. That's what makes reporting so creative. When the right story comes along, instead of writing this —

A Hicksville man has been sentenced to life in prison for murdering his girlfriend.

— you might instead lead with this:

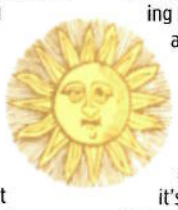
Lincoln Mabry Jr. so loved Becky Kerr that he beat her in the face with a pistol barrel and shot her to death.

Over the years, reporters have devised dozens of oddball names for offbeat leads: pssts, zingers, sing-alongs, riddle-posers, god-only-knows. Call them whatever you like; the fact is, all good reporters spend countless hours searching for the Perfect Lead. Now it's your turn.

ONE OF THE LONGEST (AND MOST MEMORABLE) LEADS EVER WRITTEN

After a surprisingly warm March day in 1995, feature writer Ken Fuson wrote this piece in The Des Moines Register. One sentence, 290 words. Gimmicky, yes. But irresistible.

Here's how Iowa celebrates a 70-degree day in the middle of March: By washing the car and scooping the loop and taking a walk; by daydreaming in school and playing hooky at work and shutting off the furnace at home; by skateboarding and flying kites and digging through closets for baseball gloves; by riding that new bike you got for Christmas and drawing hopscotch boxes in chalk on the sidewalk and not caring if the kids lost their mittens again; by looking for robins and noticing swimsuits on department store mannequins and shooting hoops in the park; by sticking the ice scraper in the trunk and the antifreeze in the garage and leaving the car parked outside overnight; by cleaning the barbecue and stuffing the parka in storage and just standing outside and letting that friendly sun kiss your face; by wondering where you're going to go on summer vacation and getting reacquainted with neighbors on the front porch and telling the boys that — yes! yes! — they can run outside and play without a jacket; by holding hands with a lover and jogging in shorts and picking up the extra branches in the yard; by eating an ice cream cone outside and (if you're a farmer or gardener) feeling that first twinge that says it's time to plant and (if you're a high school senior) feeling that first twinge that says it's time to leave; by wondering if in all of history there has ever been a day so glorious and concluding that there hasn't and being afraid to even stop and take a breath (or begin a new paragraph) for fear that winter would return, leaving Wednesday in our memory as nothing more than a sweet and too-short dream.



. . . AND ONE OF THE SHORTEST LEADS EVER WRITTEN

James Thurber was a popular humorist and cartoonist in the mid-20th century. He started out as a newspaper reporter, where an editor urged him to write short, dramatic leads — which prompted Thurber to begin a murder story this way:

Dead.

That's what the man was when they found him with a knife in his back at 4 p.m. in front of Riley's saloon at the corner of 52nd and 12th Streets.

"QUOTED"

"Every story must have a beginning. A lead. Incubating the lead is a cause of great agony. Why is no mystery. Based on the lead, a reader makes a critical decision: 'Shall I go on?' "

Rene Cappon, author of *The Associated Press Guide to Newswriting*

"The best day is one when I can write a lead that will cause a reader at his breakfast table next morning to spit up his coffee, clutch at his heart and shout, 'My God! Martha, did you read this?' "

Edna Buchanan, legendary police reporter

"Always grab the reader by the throat in the first paragraph, sink your thumbs into his windpipe in the second, and hold him against the wall until the tagline."

Paul O'Neil, writer

"If you don't hit a newspaper reader between the eyes with your first sentence, there is no need of writing a second one."

Arthur Brisbane, 19th-century yellow journalist

"I've always been a believer that if I've got two hours in which to do something, the best investment I can make is to spend the first hour and 45 minutes of it getting a good lead, because after that everything will come easily."

Don Wycliff, *Chicago Tribune*

"I don't look at my leads as a chance to show off my flowery writing. My leads are there to get you in and to keep you hooked to the story so that you can't go away."

Mitch Albom, sports columnist, *Detroit Free Press*

"The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn't induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead. And if the second sentence doesn't induce him to continue to the third, it's equally dead."

William Zinsser, author, *On Writing Well*

THE CITY INSTALLS NEW PARKING METERS. WHAT KIND OF LEAD SHOULD YOU WRITE?

The city council met Tuesday to consider installing parking meters on Boinck Street, a road bordering the school campus, where students have always parked for free. Angry students argued against the plan. "It's just greedy," said Dan DeLyon. "It's slimy," said Isabelle Ringing. "It's a stab in the back," said May K. Fist.

"It's long overdue," the mayor insisted, and the measure passed. Effective Jan. 1, the meters will cost 50 cents an hour — and parking violations will result in a $50 ticket.

Suppose you're covering this story for the campus newspaper. What kind of lead would you write? A basic news lead, or something more provocative? Here are a few options:

> The city council met Tuesday to discuss . . .

Wait! Stop! This is boring. What's the *news?* Try again:

> A proposal to install parking meters on Boinck Street was a topic of hot debate at Tuesday's city council meeting.

Still too dull. Why? It misses the point. The *proposal* isn't the story. The *meeting* isn't the story. The *impact on your readers* is the story. That's got to be the main emphasis.

> Students will pay to park on Boinck Street starting Jan. 1, thanks to a measure passed by the city council Tuesday.

Better. It's a standard news lead, but it does a good job of answering the question, "Why should I care?" (although some editors might challenge the use of the word *thanks).*

But must this story use a serious lead? Or could we try:

> There's no such thing as a free parking space — not after Jan. 1, anyway, when students will start paying 50 cents an hour to park on Boinck Street.

Clever? Or cliché? That lead has a little attitude, but is it too much? And should it say "students will start paying" — or "*you* will start paying"? If you like the idea of aiming this story at "*you* the student reader," then how about:

> Starting Jan. 1, it'll cost you $50 if your parking meter expires on Boinck Street.
>
> Happy New Year.

Is it OK to featurize the lead like that? If so, why not show how the parking plan would affect a typical student —

> Dan DeLyon's job at Stinky's Pizza barely pays him enough to gas up his '93 Camaro every day. So starting Jan. 1, he'll be taking the bus to school.
>
> "They're sticking meters on Boinck Street," he said. "I can't pay 20 bucks a week to park."

— and then segue into the details of the plan that passed last night. Is that an engaging way to humanize the topic?

> "It's long overdue," said mayor Lilac A. Rugg, describing a new measure passed by the city council Tuesday authorizing the installation of parking meters on Boinck Street.

Ugh. A dull quote makes a dull lead — and so do phrases like "authorizing the installation." (Notice, too, how deeply buried the phrase "parking meters" is.) Some editors say it's lazy to start *any* lead with a quote. But how about:

> "It's slimy," said Isabelle Ringing.
> "It's just greedy," said Dan DeLyon.
> "It's a stab in the back," said May K. Fist.
>
> During an angry debate at Tuesday's city council meeting, students voiced their anger at a plan to install parking meters on Boinck Street. But the plan passed, so students will start feeding meters Jan. 1.

These quotes are strong, but those student names are a bit distracting (besides, the story isn't about *them).* What if we edited the quotes for greater impact? Like this:

> "Slimy."
> "Greedy."
> "A stab in the back."
>
> Students voiced their anger at the city council's plan to install parking meters on Boinck Street on Tuesday. But the plan passed, which means students will start feeding meters Jan. 1.

Those opening quotes now have more punch. But:

- It sounds like they'll install the parking meters *Tuesday.* That sentence needs rewriting to eliminate confusion.
- Many editors (and readers) may feel this lead is unfairly biased. It seems to side with the angry students. Agree?

The most effective lead, then, may be one that combines the meters, the meeting and your money. How about:

> The meters are coming.
>
> Despite opposition from students, the city council approved a new parking plan Tuesday — which means that starting Jan. 1, you'll pay 50 cents an hour to park on Boinck Street.

As you can see, you've got lots of options, depending on your taste and news judgment. Which version would you choose?

CHECKLIST

- **Be concise.** Streamline your ideas, your words, your sentence structure. Think *subject-verb-object.*

  The biggest problem with most leads? They're too wordy. Remember, news leads are usually just one sentence. Most use fewer than 30 words. That's not an ironclad rule — just an observation *based on millions of successful news stories.*

- **Be accurate.** Get your facts and spelling right. One mistake in the lead can undermine the entire story.

- **Remember what day it is** when readers read your story. If there's a chance of confusion when you write about *tomorrow's concert* or *last night's game,* use the names of the days to be safe.

  And speaking of days: Be careful to put the date in the right place.

  Wrong: *The panel will meet to discuss drug use on Friday.*

  Right: *The panel will meet on Friday to discuss drug use.*

- **Don't name names.** Don't say *John Smith was hit by a bus* in your lead, unless everyone knows who John Smith is. (Don't just say *A man was hit by a bus,* either. Try to add a touch of description, like *An elderly Mudflap man was hit by a bus.)*

- **Use strong verbs.** Which means rewriting that sentence above to make it active, not passive: *A bus struck and killed an elderly Mudflap man Tuesday. . .*

  Beware of soft, mushy verbs like "be," "try" and "plan" — or dull, bureaucratic verbs like "considered," "met" and "issued." Don't let your leads bog down in meetingspeak. And speaking of meetings:

- **Ask "Why should I care?"** Write from the reader's point of view as often as possible. Don't just report — *explain.* Explaining why things matter often makes the best lead.

- **Sell the story.** Find out what makes *this* story different or special, and use that to punch up the lead. Who wants to read another ordinary meeting/game/speech story?

- **Don't get hung up** by a problem lead. Unsure of how to start the story? Just jot something down and move on. Finish the story, then loop back around and revisit the lead.

- **Move attributions to the end of the sentence,** the reporting textbook said. Not: *The reporting textbook said to move attributions to the end of the sentence.* ▼

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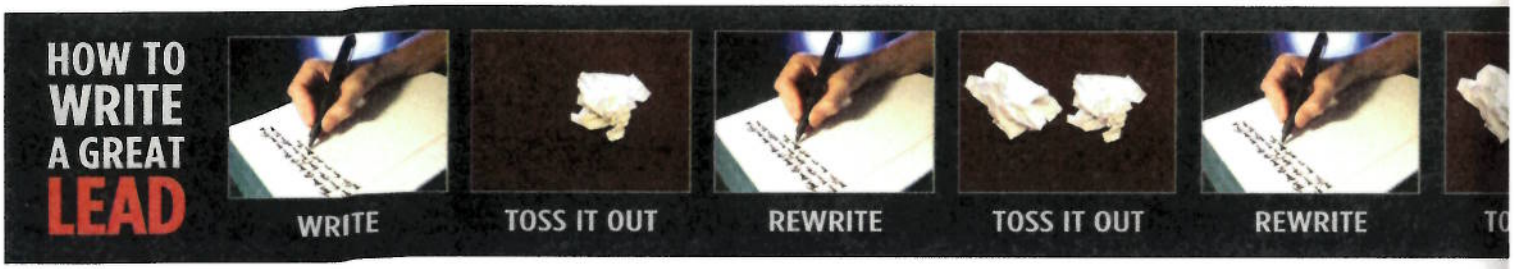
MORE ON ATTRIBUTIONS ▶ 84, 181



Leads that succeed

A roundup of the most popular, commonly used options.

Writing is a creative process, so there's no way to list every conceivable category of lead. (Many have tried; all have failed.) Instead, this collection of favorites is just a beginning. Remember, there's no type of lead that *always works*, just as there's no type of lead that *always fails*. The success of every lead depends on how well you write it. And rewrite it. And rewrite it.

Want more ideas? Browse our collection of clever leads scattered throughout THE MORGUE

1 BASIC NEWS LEADS

◆ ***The summary lead*** begins the majority of news stories by combining the most significant of the five W's into one sentence:

> The Pentagon has ordered 1,500 additional troops to Iraq to provide security in advance of the upcoming election, military officials announced Wednesday. – THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

◆ ***The delayed identification lead*** is a type of news lead that withholds a significant piece of information — usually a person's name — until the second paragraph:

> A Smallville man escaped injury Saturday after plunging over Wohelo Falls in a kayak.
>
> Lance Boyle, 27, was treated for cuts and bruises at Mercy Hospital after what he called a "wild, boneheaded ride."

Spreading the information through two short paragraphs makes it easier to digest than if you crammed it all into one long paragraph.

By structuring that same information a bit differently — still using a delayed-identification lead — the story takes a different tone:

> Lance Boyle will never forget the "wild, boneheaded ride" he took Saturday.
>
> The Smallville man escaped injury after plunging over Wohelo Falls in a kayak.

Most news stories won't name names in the lead unless they belong to recognizable public figures or celebrities. A lead that does that, however, is called — what else? — an ***immediate identification lead:***

> Actress Scarlett Johansson was involved in a minor car crash near Disneyland last week while trying to elude photographers.

2 ANECDOTAL/NARRATIVE LEADS

Some stories unfold slowly, as the writer eases into the topic with an engaging or meaningful anecdote. This *anecdotal lead* begins a story on adult skateboarders:

> About five years ago, architect Mark Seder was reading the morning paper and watching his 10-year-old son riding at a local skate park. As he kept looking up from the paper to his son, something dawned on him.
>
> "I realized that I was getting out of shape and I thought, 'Why in the world don't I join him?' "
>
> Soon afterward, armed with a board, a helmet, and knee and elbow pads, Seder took his first tentative ride. He was 49 years old.
>
> Today, Seder is 54 and still skating . . . .
>
> – STEVE WILSON, *Portland Tribune*

Ideally, the anecdote will have a beginning, middle and end; it will be a mini-story that sheds some light on the *bigger* story you're about to tell.

Some feature stories begin by dropping you right into the action — action that often continues throughout the entire story. These are called *narrative leads.* If anecdotal leads are like snapshots, narrative leads are movies:

> "Oh, Jesus," she moaned softly. She squeezed my hand.
>
> The vacuum machine purred steadily and the fetus that was her unborn child was sucked through a clear plastic hose and into a large glass bottle.
>
> "Oh," she said again, and scratched my forearm.
>
> "We're almost done," the doctor said. "I just have to check and make sure you're all clean and empty."
>
> She squeezed my hand harder. . . .
>
> – BOB GREENE, from a column called "Kathy's Abortion"

3 SCENE-SETTER LEADS

In 1941, Time magazine wrote a story on America's reaction to the attack on Pearl Harbor. It began with a description:

> It was a Sunday morning, clear and sunny. Many a citizen was idly listening to the radio when the flash came that the Japanese had attacked Hawaii. . . .

Scene-setter leads lack the urgency of hard-news leads. They're a device borrowed from fiction *("It was a dark and stormy night. . .")*, and they're usually reserved for long feature stories, where descriptions of sights, sounds and smells transport you to another place:

> The stink. That hits you first. Like a furnace blast. Now notice the mirrors spackled with dried mucous, sweat and spit, the faint arcs of blood that speckle the walls behind the ring. The portrait of Jesus as a boxer watching over the heavy bags. The ring, with its ropes that sag like a sad smile.
>
> It doesn't get any more authentic than an old boxing gym. As real and as honest and as raw as the paint peeling from the walls. . . .
>
> – INARA VERZEMNIEKS, *The Oregonian*

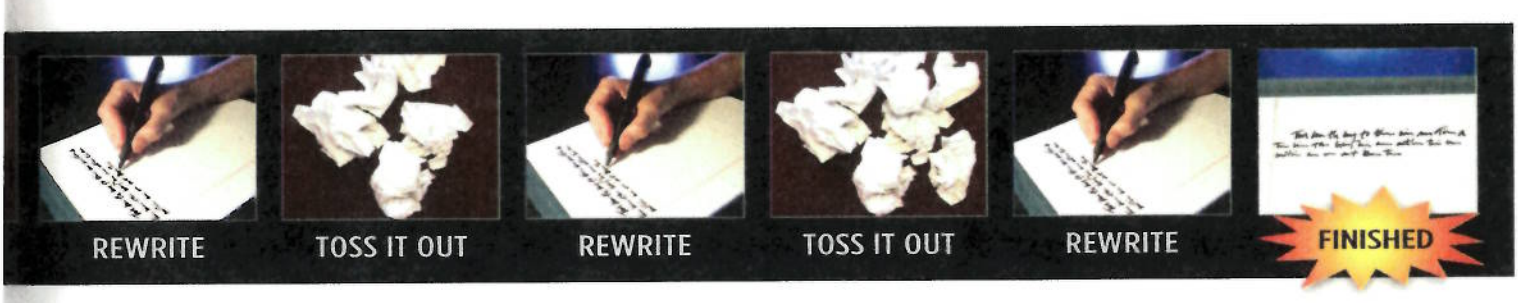
6 DIRECT ADDRESS LEADS

Virtually all news stories are written in an objective, third-person voice; stories refer to *him, her, they, them.* But feature stories often use the second-person voice to speak directly to *you*, the reader:

> If you've been waiting for a chance to collect every episode of "The Simpsons" in one boxed DVD set, you're finally in luck.

For a feature about "missed connection" classified ads, a *direct address lead* may be the best way to explain the story's topic:

> You're at a party when you spot a stranger across the room. You feel a spark, a moment when your eyes lock with his. But your friends are tugging at your sleeve, ready to leave, so you head out the door. Now you can't get Mr. Fascinating Stranger out of your mind. Why didn't you just go over and talk? What if he felt the same connection?
>
> Some people don't just wonder – they advertise. . . .
>
> – KRISTI TURNQUIST, *The Oregonian*



4

BLIND LEADS

These are more extreme versions of the *delayed identification leads* mentioned earlier. You deliberately tease readers by withholding a key piece of information, then spring it on them in a subsequent paragraph. Like this:

> The most valuable consumers in the apparel business right now are people who carry no cash, have no credit cards and often spit up dinner on their new clothes.
>
> They're infants and toddlers — and at a time when sales in many apparel categories are flat, they're fueling a major boom in baby clothes.
>
> — **JOHN REINAN,** *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis)

Here's a terrific blind lead for a sports story:

> First the pale pink nail polish. Then the gold stud earrings and the monogrammed purse.
>
> Is this any way for a football player to dress? It is if she's a girl.
>
> Meet Erin Shilk, 5-foot-3 and 108 pounds: lover of the Aggies, boys, soccer, cooking and chemistry. She's a girl blazing a trail for the '90s. . . .
>
> — **BONNIE GANGELHOFF,** *The Houston Post*

5

ROUNDUP LEADS

Sometimes, instead of focusing on just *one* person, place or thing in the lead, you want to impress the reader with a longer list. Take the *roundup lead* on this legislature story:

> Gamblers get more choices. Smokers inhale cheaper cigarettes. And tipplers can hoist a round to Oregon lawmakers who kept state alcohol taxes among the lowest in the nation.
>
> Even gluttons came out OK in the just-ended legislative session, which rejected efforts to require more nutritious school lunches and more time in PE classes.
>
> "Sin had a fabulous session," summed up Sen. Ginny Burdick, D-Portland.
>
> — **HARRY ESTEVE,** *The Oregonian*

This feature story uses a blind roundup lead:

> Sherlock Holmes did it. So did Albert Einstein, Hugh Hefner, Bing Crosby, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, President Gerald Ford and Popeye the Sailor.
>
> Yes, they all discovered the secret of looking smooth, suave and utterly sophisticated:
>
> Pipe-smoking.

. . . AND THREE LAZY LEADS YOU SHOULD GENERALLY AVOID

◆ ***Topic leads.*** It's not enough to simply state that a game was played —

> The Swamp Toads battled the Mudhogs in a crucial conference playoff Saturday.

— or that a meeting was held:

> The school board convened Tuesday night to discuss complaints about the cafeteria.

Those are called *topic leads.* And they're lazy. The news is *not* that a game was played; what matters is the *outcome* of the game. Who won? And yes, the school board met. Big deal. What happened?

Topic leads are weak because they convey no actual news. Instead, they say to readers: *Maybe something happened. Or maybe not. We're not sure.*

◆ ***Question leads.*** Some editors *loathe* sports stories that begin with questions —

> Did the Swamp Toads finally figure out how to reverse the Mudhog curse Saturday?

— or meeting stories, too, for that matter:

> What has the school board decided to do to reduce complaints about cafeteria food?

Get. To. The. Point.

Question leads are just weak, irritating stalls — sometimes. But does that make *all* question leads taboo? No. It's possible to craft clever, engaging questions that hook us into reading further. But beware; you may need to convince grumpy editors that a question lead is the best option.

◆ ***Quote leads.*** Seldom is a quote so terrific that it becomes the smartest, most engaging way to launch a story. Instead, what usually happens is this:

> "The cafeteria food is awful, and it costs too much," said sophomore Anne Chovey at the school board meeting Tuesday.

The problem? The quote doesn't fairly summarize the story. It's an opinion, not a fact. We don't immediately know who's speaking. The sentence ends awkwardly.

That quote would work well in the second paragraph — following a newsier lead.

7

THE STARTLING STATEMENT

One in four Americans will be infected with a sexually transmitted disease at some point in their lives. Did that grab your attention?

That's the goal of the *startling statement* (also called a "zinger" or a "Hey, Martha!"). It's used to begin this story from Romania. We dare you — *try* to stop reading:

> Before Toma Petre's relatives pulled his body from the grave, ripped out his heart, burned it to ashes, mixed it with water and drank it, he hadn't been in the news much.
>
> That's often the way it is with vampires here in Romania. Quiet lives, active deaths.
>
> Villagers here are outraged that the police are involved in a simple vampire slaying. After all, vampire slaying is an accepted, though hidden, bit of national heritage, even if illegal.
>
> "What did we do?" pleaded Flora Marinescu, Petre's sister. "If they're right, he was already dead. If we're right, we killed a vampire and saved three lives. Is that so wrong?"
>
> — **MATTHEW SCHOFIELD,** Knight Ridder Newspapers

8

WORDPLAY LEADS

This catch-all category encompasses a wide range of amusing leads, including bad puns:

> For Germans trying to lose weight, the wurst is yet to come.

Or this scene-setter with sound effects:

> *Kawhooooooooomp!* The Hell Candidates' twin flame cannons torch off like the burners igniting in a jet engine and flames spike 20 feet up into the lights above the stage of the Paris Theatre.
>
> — **JOHN FOYSTON,** *The Oregonian*

Or this portrait painted with typography:

> Most dogs have upper teeth shaped something like this: VVVVVVVVVV.
>
> Buster Finkel, sad-faced pet of Max Finkel, has upper teeth something like this: UUUUUUUUU.

Or witty wordplay like this, from a story about a mother caught in the middle between the police and the welfare system. Here's how reporter Heather Svokos started that story:

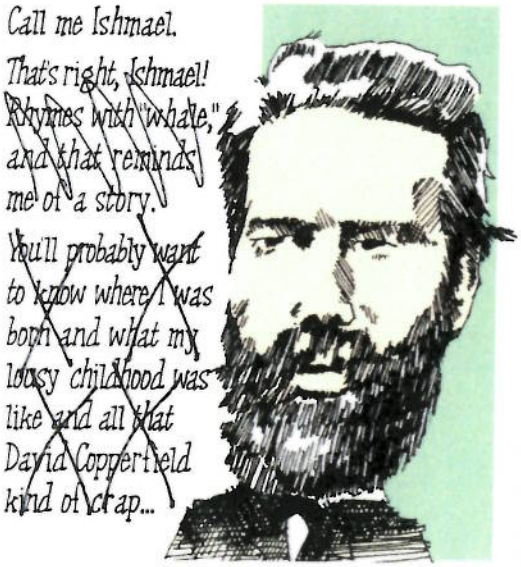
> Rock. Susan McQuaide. Hard place.

After the lead...what next?

Just write another paragraph. Then add another. And another. . . .

Writers spend lots of time and energy crafting their leads. Which is good, especially when it forces you to evaluate your material and prioritize your facts.

Yet writing a lead is just the beginning. A lead may hook readers into starting a story; it may brilliantly distill crucial data. But you have to follow the lead with good material, too.



Herman Melville

So how do you do that? How do you decide *what* facts go *where?* And *when?* And all those other *W's?*

It mostly depends on how long the story will be. That's why it's essential to discuss assignments with an editor before you start writing. You may think a story has awesome potential, but your editor may decide it's only worth a 6-inch brief. Or conversely, that innocent-looking little feature story could blossom into a prize-winning epic.

Once you know a story's length, you can estimate how tightly you'll need to condense your material. Some things will fit; others won't. Not a problem: Even the Book of Genesis squeezes the creation of the universe into just seven paragraphs.

And it's got a great lead.

BRIEFS AND BRITES: NEWS STORIES IN A CONDENSED FORM

The best way to get the hang of writing news stories is to start small, with *briefs.* A brief is any news story that's — well, *brief.* Some briefs are just a paragraph long (like the smartly crafted news summaries on the front page of The Wall Street Journal). Longer briefs may contain five or six paragraphs; if they're bigger than that, they're called *stories.*

Some briefs are written as entertaining little featurettes. They're called *brites,* and they're usually odd or amusing news nuggets told in a humorous or ironic way, as an alternative to ordinary briefs.

Here's an example of each.

A BRIEF: *Most standard news briefs are written using the inverted pyramid structure: a summary lead followed by additional details in descending order of importance. That's true for this example, as well. It's a typical news brief summarizing the key facts of a local bank robbery.*

A man robbed a Lake Grove-area bank Monday, making off with an undisclosed amount of cash.

No weapon was seen, and no one was hurt in the incident.

According to Lake Oswego police records, a man entered the Key Bank branch at 16210 S.W. Bryant Road about 3:15 p.m. and presented a teller with a note demanding money. The man then left the branch's back door and rode away on a bicycle.

Police described the man as in his 20s, about 5 feet 10 inches tall and 180 pounds. He was last seen wearing a baseball or fisherman-type cap, jeans, and a black, long-sleeved, quilted jacket.

A BRITE: *Brites provide more personality and more comic relief than standard news briefs. The lead tries harder to provoke interest; the ending often serves as a "kicker," providing a whimsical or unusual punch line. The key is keeping everything as short and tight as possible.*

It's enough to bring tears — or milk — to your eyes.

In Istanbul Wednesday, a Turkish construction worker poured milk into his hand, snorted it up his nose and squirted it 9.2 feet out of his left eye in what he hopes will be recognized as a new world record.

"I'm happy and proud that I can get Turkey in the record book even if it's for milk squirting," said Ilker Yilmaz, 28, who is able to perform the unusual feat because of an anomaly in his tear gland.

Guinness World Records will officially verify Yilmaz's record after reviewing documents from witnesses at the event, which was sponsored by Kay Sut, a Turkish milk company.

THE SECOND PARAGRAPH (THE NUT GRAF) AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

As we've seen, there are basically two types of leads:

1) Those that summarize the story, getting *right to the point,* and

2) Those that don't.

Now, there's nothing wrong with writing a punchy lead that teases or amuses readers. Like this:

Want to live longer? Have another beer.

Fun stuff! But readers will quickly ask, *What's this story about?* Which is why the next paragraph says:

Researchers from Laube University say beer has antioxidant boosters that could help fight cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

Aha! *Now* we see.

That paragraph — the one that condenses the story idea into a nutshell — is called the *nut graf.* And it's vital. Without a nut graf, impatient readers may wonder *What's the point?* and drift away, no matter how clever your lead is.

MUST EVERY STORY CONTAIN A NUT GRAF, THEN?

No. Nut grafs are helpful for feature stories (see examples at right). But for news stories, your second or third paragraph may have other duties to perform. You may need it ***to supplement any of the five W's missing from the lead:***

A Salem golfer is recovering after being hit by lightning Friday morning.

Adam Neve, 53, is in fair condition at Mercy Hospital after being knocked unconscious on the third hole of Salem Golf Club during a sudden thunderstorm.

Or to provide background for the action described in the lead:

Electricity was finally restored for 3,000 shivering Loften residents Friday.

Repair crews worked for more than 72 hours after Monday night's ice storm downed dozens of power lines.

Or to add a supporting quote:

It's official: Ike Arumba, the Stars' star shortstop, is out for the season.

"My doctor said he's never seen a wrist as badly shattered as mine," said Arumba, who was hit by a pitch in Saturday's game against Lincoln.

EXERCISES IN WRITING BRIEFS AND BRITES ▸65, 66

THE PARTS OF A STORY: HOW TO ORGANIZE YOUR FACTS EFFECTIVELY

You've written a terrific lead. You've added a solid nut graf. Congratulations. Now what?

You need to outline your story. To do that, first review your notes. Organize your material into sections, then try arranging those sections in different orders to see what's most logical.

For instance, suppose a college is debating whether to outlaw dogs on the school grounds. Here are two different ways to organize that story. Both work fine, but which do you prefer?

How to read these stories: In the first story (left), we labeled each paragraph A, B, C, D, etc. In the second story, notice how we've repositioned those same paragraphs.

VERSION ONE *Here's a straightforward story written as an inverted pyramid. (Notice how you could cut the text after paragraphs E, G or H.) As you read the story, pay attention to its structure. Does the material flow logically from point to point?*

THE LEAD
A humorous approach to the dog problem.

THE NUT GRAF
This is the essence — the *so what?* — of the story: *Dogs may soon be outlawed.*

THE PROTESTER
We now hear from an anti-dog spokesman who addresses the *why* question.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS
This describes *when* and *how* students and staff are reacting.

SIMS QUOTE #1
To balance the argument, Juliet now expresses the views of student dog owners.

SIMS QUOTE #2
With quotes this juicy, we're happy to let her keep talking....

SIMS QUOTE #3
Another juicy, dramatic sound bite.

THE CURRENT LAW
This provides more context about pet rules on campus.

WHAT NEXT?
We finish by sending readers to the big meeting.

A Dog poop. It's everywhere: on the sidewalk, on the lawn, on the soles of your shoes.

B But that may soon change. The Bilford College board of trustees, in response to hundreds of complaints, is considering a new regulation declaring the campus off-limits to dogs.

C Ferris Wheeler, president of Students Against Dogs (SAD), has collected nearly 300 signatures on a petition calling for a campus dog ban.

"This stinks," Wheeler says. "I mean, this school smells like dog doo. Irresponsible pet owners are letting their dogs chase cyclists, bark and crap all over campus."

D Last week, the school's landscaping crew — which students call the "poop patrol" — tried posting signs saying "NO DOGS ALLOWED." Students tore them down. Tempers have started to flare.

E "This proposal is ugly and unfair to responsible dog owners like me," says junior Juliet Sims. "I admit there's too much poop on the sidewalks, but it's wrong to let a few bad apples ruin it for everybody."

F Sims lives off-campus with a golden retriever named Romeo. "He's my sweetie," she says. "He sleeps with me, eats with me, showers with me. He even goes to class with me."

G A ban on dogs would pose a painful dilemma for dog-lovers like Sims.

"I hate locking Romeo up all day," she says. "I'd rather quit this stupid school."

H Campus regulations currently require all dogs to be leashed, but the rule is rarely enforced. And while pets are prohibited in campus dormitories, no law has ever banned them from school grounds.

I To resolve the dispute, the board will hold a public hearing at 7 p.m. Thursday in Bilford Union, Room 11.

VERSION TWO *This story uses all of Version One's material but arranges the paragraphs in a different order to produce a different effect. Notice how this version begins and ends with Juliet, the dog owner. Does this structure seem more appealing?*

THE LEAD/ SIMS QUOTE #2
This lead starts the story with a more human angle.

THE NUT GRAF

SIMS QUOTE #1
Now we get the joke: Romeo is... a dog! This is called a *blind lead* — where readers have to wait a paragraph or two for the setup to pay off.

THE CURRENT LAW
This info now appears sooner than it did in the previous story.

THE PROTESTER
Notice how the anti-dog argument comes later in this version. Does that seem to tilt the story in favor of Juliet? Is this biased?

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS
Notice how the line about "tempers" leads into the next paragraph.

WHAT NEXT?

SIMS QUOTE #3
Like closing a circle, the story ends where it began: with Juliet. ▼

Juliet loves Romeo.

F "He's my sweetie," she says. "He sleeps with me, eats with me, showers with me. He even goes to class with me."

B But that may soon change. The Bilford College board of trustees, in response to hundreds of complaints, is considering a new regulation declaring the campus off-limits to dogs.

Which means that Juliet Sims may have to bid farewell to Romeo, her golden retriever, whenever she goes to school.

E "This proposal is ugly and unfair to responsible dog owners like me," says Sims, a junior living off campus. "I admit there's too much poop on the sidewalks, but it's wrong to let a few bad apples ruin it for everybody."

H Campus regulations currently require all dogs to be leashed, but the rule is rarely enforced. And while pets are prohibited in campus dormitories, no law has ever banned them from school grounds.

But lately, some anti-dog activists have started to bark. Ferris Wheeler, president of Students Against Dogs (SAD), has collected nearly 300 signatures on a petition calling for a campus dog ban.

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