In journalism, the beginning sentences of a news story are everything. Called leads or “ledes,” they must convey essential information, set the tone and entice people to continue reading. If you’re interested in becoming an expert journalist, understanding how to write a lead is a key skill for your toolbox.

Tips for Writing Leads

Below are some helpful hints to keep in mind.

The Five W’s and H

News writing strives to answer “The Five W’s and H:” that is, *Who, What, When, Where, Why*and*How*. Good leads answer as many of these questions as possible in a single sentence. When writing a lead, it helps to think about which of these facts is the most vital for readers to know.

Keep It Short

A good lead provides all the information the reader requires in just a few words. Ideally, a lead should be between 25 and 40 words.

Keep It Simple

Don’t clutter up the lead with unnecessary adjectives or adverbs. Also make sure that your lead only discusses one idea to avoid confusion.

Write in Active Voice

Avoid all forms of the verb “to be.” Common exceptions including writing about fatalities (“two people were killed Thursday”) and when discussing police activity (“two people were arrested”).  Passive voice is often the result of incomplete reporting.

Structure Your Lead Properly

Put your most crucial information at the very beginning of the sentence. Important secondary information can go in subsequent sentences. Not following this practice is called “burying the lead.” If you need attribution in your lead, make sure it goes toward the end of the sentence because it is less important than the information itself.

Understand the Context

Keep in mind what your readers may already know about your story based on previous media coverage. Write in a way that speaks to these realities and adds relevant, useful information.

Be Honest

Never mislead the reader. If you promise a certain type of information with your lead, you should be ready to deliver.

Once you understand these cardinal rules, you can begin to experiment with style.

7 Types of Leads

Style implies a certain degree of voice and personal ownership over how a story is written. Although there are many ways to write leads, here are seven common approaches.

Straight Lead

Also called the “summary” lead, this is by far the most common and traditional version; it should be used in most cases. It is a brief summary, containing most of the Five W’s and H in one sentence.

*“The European Parliament voted Tuesday to ratify the landmark Paris climate accord, paving the way for the international plan to curb greenhouse gas emissions to become binding as soon as the end of this week.”*

Anecdotal Lead

The anecdotal lead uses a quick, relevant story to draw in the reader. The anecdote must help enhance the article’s broader point, and you must explain the connection to that point in the first few sentences following the lead.

*“At the dilapidated morgue in the northern Brazilian city of Natal, Director Marcos Brandao walks over the blood-smeared floor to where the corpses are kept. He points out the labels attached to the bright metal doors, counting out loud. It has not been a particularly bad night, yet there are nine shooting victims in cold storage.”*

Scene-Setting Lead

The scene-setting lead describes the physical location where a story takes place.

*“On the second floor of an old Bavarian palace in Munich, Germany, there’s a library with high ceilings, a distinctly bookish smell and one of the world’s most extensive collections of Latin texts. About 20 researchers from all over the world work in small offices around the room.”*

First-Person Lead

This lead describes the journalist’s personal experience with the topic. It should only be used when you have a valuable contribution and perspective that help illuminate the story.

*“For many of us, Sept. 11, 2001 is one of those touchstone dates — we remember exactly where we were when we heard that the planes hit the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. I was in Afghanistan.”*

Observational Lead

When offering an authoritative observation about a story and how it fits in with the larger picture, you should make sure you know the broader context of your subject matter.

*“Tax records and literary criticism are strange bedfellows. But over the weekend, the two combined and brought into the world a literary controversy — call it the Ferrante Furor of 2016.”*

Zinger Lead

The zinger lead is dramatic and attention-grabbing. Although it has a strong tone, it requires a hard set of facts to back it up.

*“His last meal was worth $30,000 and it killed him.”*(The story was about a man who died while trying to smuggle cocaine-filled bags in his stomach.)

Question Lead

Question leads do just that: ask a question. Although they are effective in sparking interest, use them sparingly because they generally do not provide the main points of a story as concisely.

*“What’s increasing faster than the price of gasoline? Apparently, the cost of court lobbyists.”*

Ultimately, understanding the types of leads and style options available can help journalists tell stories as clearly and effectively as possible.

**Sources:** [NPR](http://training.npr.org/digital/leads-are-hard-heres-how-to-write-a-good-one/), [Poynter](http://www.poynter.org/2016/7-ways-to-write-a-kick-ass-column-via-sally-jenkins/426990/%22%20%5Co%20%227%20ways%20to%20write%20a%20%5C%E2%80%9Ckick-ass%5C%E2%80%9D%20column%2C%20via%20Sally%20Jenkins%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), [New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/weblines/411.html), [Reuters](http://handbook.reuters.com/?title=Reporting_and_Writing_Basics#Who_do_we_write_for.3F), “How to Write a Lead” from the Purdue Online Writing Lab