How to Write a Lead

Introduction

The lead, or opening paragraph, is the most important part of a news story. With so many sources of information – newspapers, magazines, TV, radio and the internet – audiences simply are not willing to read beyond the first paragraph (and even sentence) of a story unless it grabs their interest. A good lead does just that. It gives readers the most important information in a clear, concise and interesting manner. It also establishes the voice and direction of an article.

**Tips for Writing a Lead**

1. **The Five W’s and H:** Before writing a lead, decide which aspect of the story – who, what, when, where, why, how – is most important. You should emphasize those aspects in your lead. Wait to explain less important aspects until the second or third sentence.
2. **Conflict:** Good stories have conflict. So do many good leads.
3. **Specificity:** Though you are essentially summarizing information in most leads, try to be specific as possible. If your lead is too broad, it won’t be informative or interesting.
4. **Brevity:** Readers want to know why the story matters to them and they won’t wait long for the answer. Leads are often one sentence, sometimes two. Generally, they are 25 to 30 words and should rarely be more than 40. This is somewhat arbitrary, but it’s important – especially for young journalists – to learn how to deliver information concisely. See the OWL’s page on [**concise writing**](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/conciseness/index.html) for specific tips. The [**Paramedic Method**](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/paramedic_method.html) is also good for writing concisely.
5. **Active sentences:** Strong verbs will make your lead lively and interesting. Passive constructions, on the other hand, can sound dull and leave out important information, such as the person or thing that caused the action. Incomplete reporting is often a source of [**passive leads**](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/active_and_passive_voice/index.html).
6. **Audience and context:** Take into account what your reader already knows. Remember that in today’s media culture, most readers become aware of breaking news as it happens. If you’re writing for a print publication the next day, your lead should do more than merely regurgitate yesterday’s news.
7. **Honesty:** A lead is an implicit promise to your readers. You must be able to deliver what you promise in your lead.

**What to Avoid**

1. **Flowery language:** Many beginning writers make the mistake of overusing adverbs and adjectives in their leads. Concentrate instead on using strong verbs and nouns.
2. **Unnecessary words or phrases:** Watch out for unintentional redundancy. For example, 2 p.m. Wednesday afternoon, or very unique. You can’t afford to waste space in a news story, especially in the lead. Avoid clutter and cut right to the heart of the story.
3. **Formulaic leads:** Because a lot of news writing is done on deadline, the temptation to write tired leads is strong. Resist it. Readers want information, but they also want to be entertained. Your lead must sound genuine, not merely mechanical.
4. **It:** Most editors frown on leads that begin with the word it because it is not precise and disorients the reader.

**Types of Leads**

**Summary lead:** This is perhaps the most traditional lead in news writing. It is often used for breaking news. A story about a city council vote might use this “just the facts” approach. Straight news leads tend to provide answers to the most important three or four of the Five W’s and H. Historically this type of lead has been used to convey who, what, when and where. But in today’s fast-paced media atmosphere, a straightforward recitation of who, what, when and where can sound stale by the time a newspaper hits the stands. Some newspapers are adjusting to this reality by posting breaking news online as it happens and filling the print edition with more evaluative and analytical stories focused on why and how. Leads should reflect this.

**Anecdotal lead:** Sometimes, beginning a story with a quick anecdote can draw in readers. The anecdote must be interesting and must closely illustrate the article’s broader point. If you use this approach, specificity and concrete detail are essential and the broader significance of the anecdote should be explained within the first few sentences following the lead.

**Other types of leads:** A large number of other approaches exist, and writers should not feel boxed in by formulas. That said, beginning writers can abuse certain kinds of leads. These include leads that begin with a question or direct quotation and those that make a direct appeal using the word you. While such leads might be appropriate in some circumstances, use them sparsely and cautiously.

**Examples**

**Summary lead:**

**County administrator faces ouster**

By Tony Cook for The Cincinnati Post, Jan. 14, 2005

Two Hamilton County Commissioners plan to force the county’s top administrator out of office today.

**Commentary:** This lead addresses the traditional who, what and when. If this information had been reported on TV or radio the day before, this lead might not be a good one for the print edition of the newspaper; however, if the reporter had an exclusive or posted this information online as soon as it became available, then this lead would make sense. Note that it is brief (15 words) and uses an active sentence construction.

**Summary lead:**

**Lobbyists flout disclosure rules in talks with commissioners**

By Tony Cook and Michael Mishak for the Las Vegas Sun, July 13, 2008

On more than 170 occasions this year, lobbyists failed to file disclosure forms when they visited Clark County commissioners, leaving the public in the dark about what issues they were pushing and on whose behalf.

**Commentary:** This lead is more representative of the less timely, more analytical approach that some newspapers are taking in their print editions. It covers who, what and when, but also why it matters to readers. Again, it uses active verbs, it is specific (170 occasions) and it is brief (35 words).

**Anecdotal lead:**

**Tri-staters tell stories of the devastating tsunami**

By Tony Cook for The Cincinnati Post, Jan. 8, 2005

From Dan Ralescu’s sun-warmed beach chair in Thailand, the Indian Ocean began to look, oddly, not so much like waves but bread dough.

**Commentary:** This article is a local angle on the devastating tsunami that struck Southeast Asia in 2005. As a result of the massive death toll and worldwide impact, most readers would have been inundated with basic information about the tsunami. Given that context, this lead uses an unexpected image to capture the reader’s attention and prepare them for a new take on the tsunami. Again, it is brief (23 words).

**Question lead:**

**Same lobbyist for courts, shorter term, more money**

By Tony Cook for the Las Vegas Sun, June 29, 2008

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

District and Justice Court Judges want to hire lobbyist Rick Loop for $150,000 to represent the court system in Carson City through the 2009 legislative session. During the past session, Loop’s price tag was $80,000.

**Commentary:** Question leads can be useful in grabbing attention, but they are rarely as effective as other types of leads in terms of clearly and concisely providing the main point of a story. In this case, the second paragraph must carry a lot of the weight that would normally be handled in the lead.

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