

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 that violating these strict guidelines dooms your story to failure.

It was a really good time and, then again, it wasn't really that good of a time.

It was a nice time. Yes, really nice. On the other hand, it wasn't. Not really.



Charles Dickens

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.

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 grasp 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 cellphone 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 concise? Does it bog down with unnecessary adjectives or phrases?

Is it compelling? Will it grab readers and keep them interested?

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 lead-worthy? 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 construct one 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 real 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?