
Chapter 5

Writing Leads

In every classroom and newsroom in the land, journalists work hard to craft readable news stories. All of them agree: The first paragraph is the most important. If the first paragraph, or lead, doesn't hook the reader, then it is a flop. Readers have too many other things to do, and if the lead doesn't interest them, they will not read the story. They will mow the lawn or go shopping—or watch television.

Here are a few suggestions to keep in mind while working on leads. First, keep them short and to the point. The best leads usually are no more than two or three typewritten lines, somewhere in the range of 12 to 17 words. (But don't sit around counting words!) Second, the lead should tell the reader what the story is about and recount the most essential news of the story. If the story is about a speech, the speaker's main points should be in the lead. If it's about a meeting, the main decisions made at the meeting should be in the lead. The rule is: Get to the point. Put the main facts in the lead.

Don't write: The Student Council met Friday to elect new officers for next year.

Write: Senior Patricia Apgar has been elected president of the Student Council for next year.

There are exceptions to these guidelines, of course. All stories are different, and certainly you would want to use different and novel approaches in feature writing or column writing. But the vast majority of news stories are still constructed in the inverted pyramid style, and being skillful in writing in that structure is crucial for any journalist.

Be careful not to clutter leads with nonessential information. In the story above, it is sufficient—in the lead—to announce the name of the new president. Somewhere in the story, of course, the day and place of the meeting, names of other new officers, etc., have a place. But not in the lead. The lead is a brief, concise summary of the most important fact (or facts) in the story. Most leads are one sentence long—but that's not an absolute. The rule is keep them short.

There was a time when journalists believed it necessary to get all the five *W*'s and the *H* (who, what, where, when, why and how) in the lead. You don't see many such leads anymore. Today's lead is streamlined and to the point. Just remember that readers will not wait around for the news; it has to be in the lead—if it's straight news. The five *W*'s and the *H* belong in almost all stories. But not in the first paragraph.

Leads that begin with a question—"Where is Ourtown headed this year?"—are usually unacceptable. Answer questions, don't ask them. Beginning a lead with a quote is also unacceptable—"I promise to do my best in my new office as Student Council president." You don't see many such leads in professional newspapers. That's the lazy person's way out.

The names of obscure organizations or associations do not belong in the lead. These names should be written after the lead paragraph.

Don't write: The Department of Pharmacological Research at the Ferguson and Patten Institute for Environmental Studies today warned that the use of illegal drugs is harmful.

Write: Use of illegal drugs is harmful, researchers warned today. Regular use of such drugs can cause dangerous side effects, according to a report from the Department of Pharmacological Research at the Ferguson and Patten Institute for Environmental Studies.

The following exercises will help you to become familiar with writing this all-important paragraph.

Exercise 1

Evaluate the following leads. What's wrong about these leads? What's right about them?

- a. Three seniors win scholarships.

- b. Ourtown High School's all-state center, James Donovan, has accepted a scholarship to play at State University, where he is expected to have a good chance to start as a freshman under Coach Walter Hughes' plan to let as many freshmen as he can see action early in their careers. We congratulate James.

- i. A Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD) group has been formed at Ourtown High School.

- j. Five new teachers joined the Ourtown High School faculty this year, bringing the total number of teachers to 47.

Exercise 2

Try this type of exercise again. Here are 10 more leads. Which ones make you want to read the rest of the story? Which ones do not? Why?

- a. With the scoreboard clock showing one second left and as 3,000 fans shrieked in unison, senior Brad Levy stepped to the free-throw line.

- b. Vandalism at Ourtown High School caused \$13,000 in damages last year alone, and Principal Roger Malone said this week the problem "must be solved."

- c. Students caught cheating on final exams will be expelled. Period.

d. At first she was shocked. Then she cried. Then, said new Homecoming Queen Lisa Green, "I just got numb."

e. On Friday, Sept. 24, at 9 a.m. in the morning, five new teachers will be presented at an assembly.

f. Summer brings heat, bathing suits, vacation.

g. In the spring, a young man's fancy turns to . . . baseball.

h. With elections just around the corner, the staff of The Bugle conducted a poll to see which candidate the school favors.

i. We're No. 1!!

Exercise 3

Here are five poorly written leads. Rewrite each one to keep it short and to the point.

- a. Prof. Michael Hosokawa of State University, an authority on Native American people and their social customs, will be the featured speaker at Ourtown High School's next assembly Friday, Oct. 21. The title of his speech will be "How We Can Help Preserve Native American Life."

- b. Hey, out there. Someone isn't returning his library books. Students owe a total of \$723 in fines for this year alone.

- c. The mighty Ourtown High School Golden Bears take on conference weak-sister Smithville this Friday. Make plans for your victory party now. The win will give OHS their third straight Dixie Conference title.
