

6



Community Media Workshop

Elements of a Good Lead

1. Identifies or implies most significant and newest aspect of story--to the reader, not the news source. (Their lawn, not your grass seed.)
2. Is not cluttered with too much background information that can be worked in as you unveil or tell the story. Does not try to jam "who, what, when, where, why and how" into one or two sentences.
3. Is concise--20 words or less and never more than 30 words.
4. Has "fireworks" elements--nouns, adjectives or verbs that attract people's attention.
5. Focuses on newsworthy elements--not just general problem or issue.
6. Does not announce or tell about its topic but reveals the most interesting aspect.
7. Is a movie showing a process or revealing a story--not merely a snapshot of static information. (Even statistics from a study can be dramatized to show the story behind them. Ex: Half of America's husbands have hit their wives, a new study revealed today.)
8. Tries to surprise the audience. It can follow a pattern of: "Most people think A, but it's really B."
9. Uses conversational language--not news-speak, trade jargon or formal proposal language.

FINDING AND WRITING THE LEAD

Grab the Reader

"Some writers like to begin a story with some kind of jolting word play, and still others like to begin with some sort of description setting the mood. You have to allow your material to dictate what kind of lead you will use.

"The only rule is that you get the reader involved in the story and that you get him involved quickly.

"I think a reader will consider a novel some kind of investment and will not be dismayed that he is not quite grabbed by page 10. He will give the novelist or short story writer a lot of room and time to make himself clear and to make his book interesting.

"A newspaper doesn't have that kind of luxury. You've got to get the reader's attention very quickly."

—Clyde Haberman,
The New York Times

Clarity the Key.

"Brevity (in leads) is not the primary goal. Clarity is. The old rule holds that the shorter the lead, the better. That's old enough to be forgotten. There are limits, but a 25- or 30-word lead is not necessarily better than one 35 or 40 words long. It needs to be simple and understandable, not necessarily short."

—Walter Mears, AP

FROM BASIC MEDIA WRITING, 6th ed.

By Mel Mencher

McGraw-Hill, 1999

Some Guidelines

There are few rules for lead writing. Generally, we try to keep them under 35 words. In some newsrooms, the shorter the better is a policy that holds sway, and writers there use simple, declarative sentences—subject, verb, object. This S-V-O structure, by the way, is the mainstay of media writers. Probably three-fourths of the sentences they write have this structure. Declarative sentences are the workhorses of simple, direct writing because they describe someone saying or doing something, or they show something happening:

- Chancellor Robert Hartmann asked the legislature to approve a \$50 million university building program to meet the demands of increased enrollment.
- The state legislature last night defeated the \$50 million university building bill by a vote of 67-13.

Let's apply the subject-verb-object (S-V-O) structure to these leads:

Who said or did what?

S—Chancellor Robert Hartmann
V—asked
O—legislature

What happened?

S—The state legislature
V—defeated
O—bill

Now that you can see the structure of the lead, it follows that to write a lead you look at the theme or focus and break it into its S-V-O components. Then you build the lead on this foundation.

Another approach is the time-tested Five W's and an H. Some beginners list these and answer the questions:

Who—Chancellor Robert Hartmann
What—asked the legislature to approve program
When—today
Where—(not in lead)
Why—to meet increased enrollment
How—(not in lead)



The Power of Leads: ASNE Award-Winning Leads

MOUNTOURSVILLE, Pa.—They knew them as the girl who spilled the fries in the car. Knew them as the boy who shot baskets and lighted the candles at church. Knew them as the girl who wrote poetry and played the piano.

“Small town grieves 21 dead” by Ken Moritsugu
Newsday, July 19, 1996

A waiter fond of poet Ralph Waldo Emerson attends morning prayers at his church, steps across the street and hijacks a school bus. Owing \$15,639.39 in back taxes, wielding what he says is a bomb, Catalino Sang shields himself with disabled children. Follow my orders, he says, or I will kill the kids. “No problem, I will,” says driver Alicia Chapman, crafty and calm. “But please don’t hurt the children.”

The saga of Dade County school bus No. CX-17, bound for Blue Lakes Elementary, begins.

“Terror Rides a School Bus” by Gail Epstein, Frances Robles and Martin Merzer
The Miami Herald, November 3, 1995

The past came to claim Aleksandras Lileikis this week. It knocked on his door on Sumner Street in Norwood, shattering his quiet present and shocking the friends and neighbors who thought they knew the man in the yellow house. It knocked on all of our doors, pointing to the genocide of more than 50 years, demanding that we hear the stories and seek the truth.

“A summons from history” by Susan Trausch
The Boston Globe, Sept. 23, 1994

Karubamba, Rwanda—Nobody lives here anymore. Not the expectant mothers huddled outside the maternity clinic, not the families squeezed into the church, not the man who lies rotting in a schoolroom beneath a chalkboard map of Africa. Everybody here is dead. Karubamba is a vision from hell, a flesh-and-bone junkyard of human wreckage, an obscene slaughterhouse that has fallen silent save for the roaring buzz of flies the size of honeybees.

“Only Human Wreckage Is Left in Karubamba” by Mark Fritz, Associated Press, May 12, 1994

A healthy 17-year-old heart pumped the gift of life through 34-year-old Bruce Murray Friday, following a four-hour transplant operation that doctors said went without a hitch.

“It Fluttered and Became Bruce Murray’s Heart.” By Jonathan Bor
Syracuse Post-Standard, May 12, 1984

SAN QUENTIN—In the end, Robert Alton Harris seemed determined to go peacefully, a trait that had eluded him in the 39 violent and abusive years he spent on earth.

“After Life of Violence Harris Goes Peacefully” by Sam Stanton
The Sacramento Bee, April 22, 1992

At 12:30, my husband and I were having a pleasant lunch in a restaurant. At 1:30, we were back home, sitting at the kitchen counter planning a trip to Vienna and Budapest with cherished friends. At 2:30, I was walking out of the hospital emergency room in shock, a widow, my life changed forever, beyond comprehension.

“Facing the void of a life and a love lost in a moment” by Joan Beck
Chicago Tribune, July 12, 1993

Let’s talk about tattoos.

“Tattoos and freedom” by Michael Gartner
The (Ames, Iowa) Daily Tribune, Oct. 7, 1993

MANILA, Ark.—It killed first, then it came into town.

“Tornado sneaks into Manila, killing 2 kids just as sirens wail” by Bartholomew Sullivan
The (Memphis) Commercial Appeal, April 17, 1998

http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=35612