

## CHAPTER

## 3

# Newswriting basics

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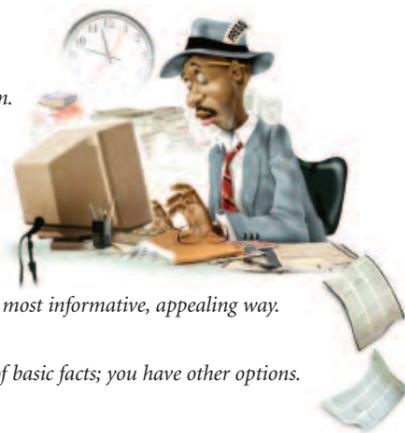
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construct a map of the road on which the Herald expedition was now journeying, if they draw a line 150 miles south by west from Unyanyembe, then 150 miles west northwest, then ninety miles north, half east, then seventy miles west by north, and that will take them to Ujiji.

"Near Isingira met a caravan of eighty Waguha from Ujiji, bearing oil, and bound for Unyanyembe. They report that a white man was left by the caravan six days ago at Ujiji. He had the same color as I have, the same shoes, the same clothes, and his face like I have, only his is white. The white man says, 'Hurrah for Ujiji! My men share my good fortune. I shall be coming back now directly; and, because I am happy at the prospect, I buy three goats and five bottles of native beer, which will be eaten and drunk directly.'

Two marches from Malagarazi brought us to Kawanga, which was the first place in Uhha where we had heard of the white man. It is the village where resides the first mutwa, the chief, to whom all caravans have to pay tribute. The white man paid twelve and a half dhodi," upon the understanding that we would have to pay no more than twelve and a half dhodi. Next morning, buoyed up by the thought that we should soon come to our journey's end, I had arranged to make a long march of it that day. The country in front of us was as cheerful as the prairie of Nebraska. The hills were void of trees almost as our own plains. The rolling waves of land enabled us to see the scores of small huts which dotted its surface, though it required a telescope to detect at a distance the beehive and the thatched huts from the bleached grass of the plain. We marched an hour, probably, and were passing a large village, with populous suburbs about it, when we saw a large party pursuing us, who, when they came up to us, asked us how we dared pass by without paying tribute to the king of Uhha.

"We have paid it!" we said, quite astonished. "To the Chief of Kawanga." "How much?" "Twelve and a half dhodi." "Oh, but that is only a small sum. However, you had better stop and rest here until we find all about it."

But we halted in the middle of the road until our messengers they sent came back. Seeing our reluctance to halt at their village, they sent men to Mionvu, living an arrow's flight from where we halted, to warn him of our contumacy. Mionvu came, robed most royally, after the fashion of the kings of Africa, in a crimson cloth, arranged togalike on his shoulders and depending to his ankles, and a sword in his right hand. A white sheeting folded across his forehead. He greeted us graciously — he was full of politeness — shook hands first with me, then with my head men, and cast a keen glance at me, and then, in order, as I thought, to measure my length. Then seating himself, he spoke with dignity on something in this style:

"Why does the white man stand in the road? The sun is hot; let him seek the shelter of my village. Here we can arrange this little matter between us. Does he know not that there is a king in Uhha? At I, Mionvu, am his servant? It is a custom of Uhha to make friends with great men, such as the white man. All Arabs and Wanguana stop here and go to the king. Does the white man mean to go on without paying tribute? Why should he desire war? I know he is strong, but we are here, his men have guns, and we have bows and arrows; but Uhha is large and has many people. The children of the king are many. It is better for me to be a friend to us he will come to our village and give us something, and then go on his way."

The armed warriors around applauded the very commonplace speech of Mionvu because it spoke the feelings with which they viewed our bales. Certain among them, however, that one portion of his speech — that which

wished us to start hostilities in order that he might have a good reason for seizing the whole. But it is not new to you, of course, if you have read this letter through, that the representative of the Herald was held of small account here, and never one did I see who would care a head for anything that you would care a head for.

shriek and shout as if a crocodile had bitten her. The guide implored me to stop her shrieking, or she would alarm the whole country, and we would have hundreds of angry Wahha about us. The men were already preparing to bolt — several being on the run with their loads. At my order to stop her noise she launched into

without bounds, a gray expanse of water.

From the western base of the hill was a thick march, though no march ever passed off since the hours seemed to have been quarters, we were so much that was novel and rare to us who had traveled so long on the highlands. The lake, being the lake on the eastward receding, advanced. We had crossed the Ruche, a thick belt of tall matted grass. We had a perfect forest of them and had entered the fields which supply the port of Ujiji, etc., and we stood at last on the hill of the myriads we had crossed at Ujiji, embowered in palms, with the silver waters of the Tanganyika rolling directly below us.

We are now about descending — in a few minutes we will have reached the spot where we had been the object of our search — our fate will soon be known. In that town knows we are coming; they know we are so close to them. If a word of the white man at Unyanyembe reaches us, we are there yet. We shall take them for no other but a white man would have come to Ujiji with the country in a state — no other but a crazy white man, the son of Nasib, is going to report to the Burghash for not taking his advice.

But we are but a mile from Ujiji now, and we should let them know a caravan is descending. "Firing" is the word passed down the column, and gladly do they loaded their muskets half full, and the captain of a line-of-battle ship. Down going, sending huge charges home to the battery. After volley is fired. The flags are flying. The United States of America is in front, waving joyfully. The United States is in the zenith of his glory. The flag of Zanzita will know it directly and will tell them they may — as to what it means. Myriads of Arabs and Stripes so beautiful to my mind. The Tanganyika has such an effect. The Arab blows his horn, and the shrill, with the far and near; and still the cannon may be heard by seconds. By this time the Arab is heard; the natives of Ujiji, Waguha, Wanguana, and I know not whom hurry up to ask what it all means — this firing, and blowing of horns and flag flying. The Arabs shouted out to me by the dead Arabs have run up breathlessly to ask and anxiously where I come from.

My acquaintance with them. The expedition goes on. I should like to settle the vexed question of the view.

Who is he? Has he fled? Suddenly a man — at my elbow shouts in English, "Who is he, sir?"

"Who, who the deuce are you?" "I am the servant of Dr. Livingstone," he says. "I can ask any more questions he is running towards the town."

We have at last entered the town. There are a great many people around me — I might say a great many, but in exaggeration, it seems to me. It is a great procession. As we move, they move towards us. The expedition at last the journey is ended for a time; but I have more steps to make. There is a great many respectable Arabs, and as I come near the face of an old man among them.

cap with a gold band around it, his dress jacket of red blanket cloth, and his pants — I don't observe. I am shaking hands with him, and I say: "Dr. Livingstone, I pre- And he says, "Yes."

having marched nearly six hours within the jungle which stretched for miles around us.

We were only once on the point of being discovered, through the madfreak of a weakbrained woman who was the wife of one of the black soldiers. We were

of the rough path or of the toilsome steep, spurred forward by the cheery promise, the ascent was performed in a short time. I was pleased at the sight; and, as we descended, it opened more and more into view until it was revealed at last into a grand inland sea,

cap with a gold band around it, his dress jacket of red blanket cloth, and his pants — I don't observe. I am shaking hands with him, and I say: "Dr. Livingstone, I pre- And he says, "Yes."

# Just the facts

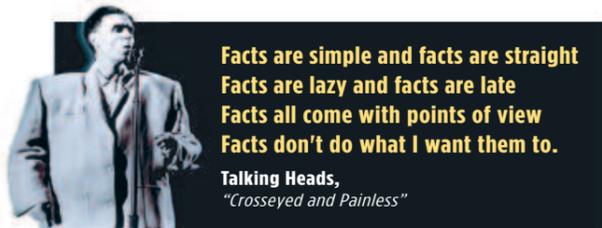
When you write a story, you must try to be objective. Truthful. Fair.

You can't just pull material from your memory, or quote your friends, or make pronouncements about the way things ought to be. You must be *factual* — which means basing your stories on the best facts you can find.

Good reporters respect the integrity of facts. When you select them carefully and arrange them skillfully, you can communicate without inserting your own opinions. For instance, this fact by itself seems trivial: *Percentage of Americans who can name two freedoms granted by the First Amendment: 28.*

But now add this fact: *Percentage of Americans who can name two members of "The Simpsons" cartoon family: 52.*

Together, those two facts lead to a logical, unspoken conclusion — that Americans pay more attention to TV characters than to government. True? Arguably. But it's a good example of how journalism should work: The *facts* tell the story, and readers draw their own conclusions.



**Facts are simple and facts are straight. Facts are lazy and facts are late. Facts all come with points of view. Facts don't do what I want them to.**

Talking Heads, "Crosseyed and Painless"

## AND NOW, POSSIBLY THE WORST STORY EVER WRITTEN

How many different kinds of errors does it take to screw up a news story? Here's a frightening (but fictional) example:

**1** Unhealthy? Says who? That's an unsupported opinion. Reporters shouldn't take sides on controversial issues.

**5** Bad math alert! The dorm is open 40 weeks per year; that means each resident ate 20 burgers a week. Likely? No. And one carrot does not weigh one pound, so this second statistic is bogus and misleading.

**7** This is pseudoscience. What specific "research" has proven that meat is bad? Which cancer rates are lower in Japan? Aren't other factors (stress, lifestyle, environment) also responsible for causing cancer?

**9** Inserting religious opinion into any news story is a sure-fire way to offend readers. Believe whatever you want, politically or religiously, but never try to pass it off as news.

**11** June only has 30 days. A mistake as simple (and dumb) as this can cast doubt on every other fact in the story.

**1** Campus vegetarians will hold a puke-in at Turkle Hall Friday to protest the dormitory's unhealthy food policies. All students are encouraged to attend. **2**

**3** "The menu in that dorm is just meat, meat, meat," said Ben Dover, the highly respected president of Vegetarians Opposed to Meat in Turkel (VOMIT). "That's why so many Turkle residents have been getting sick this year." **4**

**5** According to Dover, Turkle's 200 residents were fed more than 160,000 hamburgers last year while eating just 1,000 pounds of carrots. In other words, a typical student ate just one carrot for every 160 burgers.

**6** Dover said the protest was sparked after a student worker in Turkel's cafeteria spotted a crate of beef labeled "Grade D: Fit for Human Consumption." Many colleges try to save money by buying Grade D meat products, which include brains, skin and testicles.

**7** Research has shown that a diet heavy in meat is bad for you. In Japan, where rice is a staple in people's diets, there is a much lower incidence of cancer. My own health has improved dramatically since I stopped eating meat last year. **8**

**9** Even spiritual masters like Gandhi and the Buddha proved that a vegetarian lifestyle brings you closer to God.

**10** "Our puke-in has received letters of support from famous vegetarians like Opra Winfrey and Dwight Yokum," Dover added.

**11** The event begins at noon Friday, June 31, outside the Turkle Hall cafeteria.

**2** Encouraged to attend? By whom? This smacks of partisan cheerleading.

**3** Highly respected? In whose opinion? Objective news writing should avoid vague, biased generalizations like this.

**4** Says who? According to what statistic? It's irresponsible to quote an allegation like that without adding facts to support it (or a counterargument to refute it). In fact, because this story relies entirely on just one source — Dover — it's far too unbalanced to be trustworthy.

**6** There is no such thing as "Grade D" meat. In fact, this entire paragraph is an urban legend: folklore popularly believed to be true. A good reporter would have checked out this story and discovered that it's a fabrication.

**8** Never inject yourself into a news story. "My" opinions and anecdotes about "me" are irrelevant and unprofessional.

**10** By misspelling *Oprah* and *Yoakam*, the reporter undermines the credibility of this entire story. (Note, too, how many times the reporter has flubbed the spelling of *Turkel*.)

## QUOTED

"Credibility — more than news itself — is our stock in trade. An informative story is important. A dramatic story is desirable. An honest story is imperative." **David Shaw**, *Los Angeles Times* media writer

"What matters to me most is the truth. That's the only thing that matters in journalism. The fundamental reason you're reading journalism is because it's truthful. Of course, everyone believes their own version of the truth. If you believe it, it's true. So truth is in the same place it will always be: the hazy middle." **Mervyn Keizer**, chief of research at *US Weekly*

"Facts are stupid things." **Ronald Reagan**, misquoting John Adams, who said "Facts are stubborn things"

"Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts." **Daniel Patrick Moynihan**, scholar and U.S. senator

"We are recorders and reporters of the facts — not judges of the behavior we describe." **Alfred C. Kinsey**, founder, Institute for Sex Research

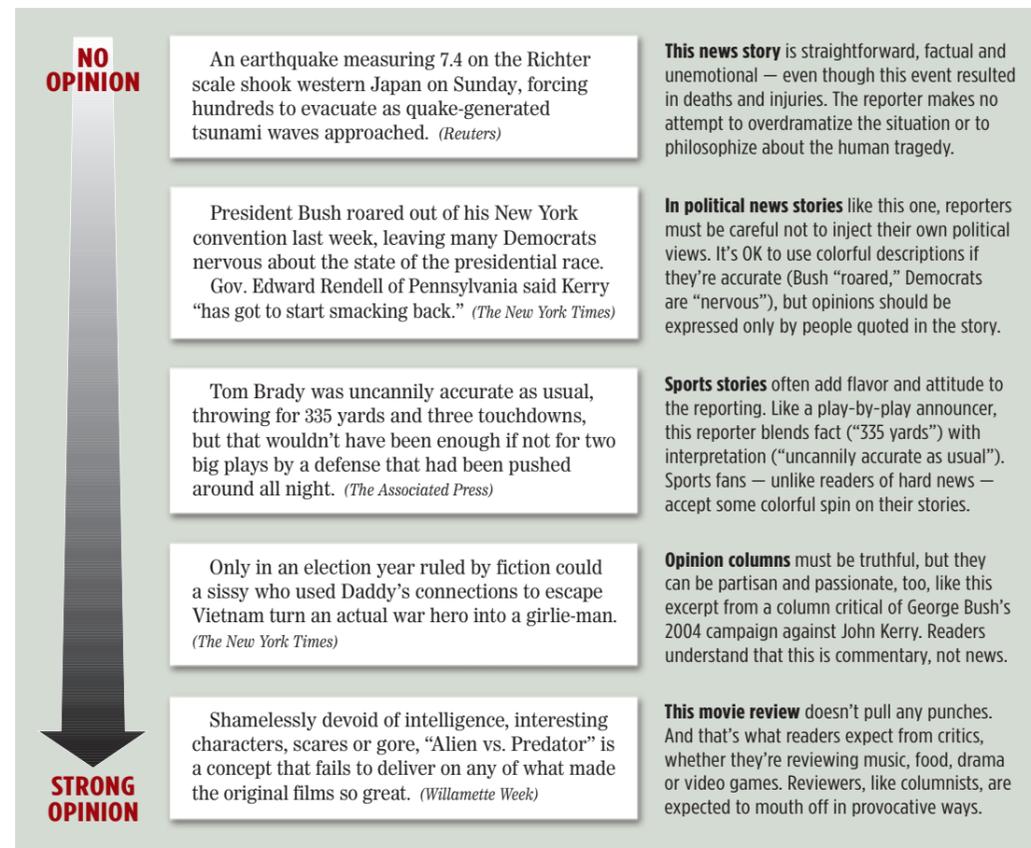
"Every fact has the same weight. If you screw up on something small, trivial, then you cast doubt on the whole piece. We trudge through every inch of it because once you've lost your credibility, that's it." **Sara Lippincott**, editor and fact-checker, *The New Yorker*

"For one 'Talk of the Town' piece, I had to determine the number of Ritz crackers in a huge New Jersey supermarket. I called the general manager of the store, who then shouted to an assistant over their PA system. The assistant went to count the number of Ritz boxes on the floor while the manager and I tried to estimate the number of crackers in a box. We then went through the same process with hot dog packages." **Peter Canby**, fact-checker for *The New Yorker*

## SO WHERE DO OPINIONS BELONG IN JOURNALISM?

Journalism, it has been said, presents a maximum of information with a minimum of opinion. But isn't it sometimes appropriate to add emotion and attitude to newswriting? Doesn't complete objectivity suck the life out of stories? Where do you draw the line?

Journalists debate these questions endlessly. And the answers aren't always simple. Most newspaper stories can be placed on a continuum that ranges from rigidly objective (breaking news) to rabidly opinionated (movie reviews). Here's what we mean:



## QUOTED

"Many a good newspaper story has been ruined by oververification." **James Gordon Bennett**, 19th-century newspaper editor

"I'm a great fan of reality. Truth is easier. And weirder. And funnier. Not all the time, but you can fall back on the truth. You can't fall back on a story you made up, because then you start to wonder if it is good or funny or right. I'm lazy. If I have a fact, I don't have to worry about if I've made the right move or said it properly." **Hunter S. Thompson**, legendary gonzo reporter

"I have a built-in bias against reporters who have axes to grind. I think there are reporters who allow their own bias to encroach on their journalism, and that's a crime against journalism." **Don Hewitt**, executive producer, *60 Minutes*

"People don't ask for facts in making up their minds. They would rather have one good, soul-satisfying emotion than a dozen facts." **Robert Keith Leavitt**, author/journalist

"The problem is not that journalists can't get their facts straight: They can and usually do. Nor is it that the facts are obscure: Often, the most essential facts are also the most obvious ones. The problem is that journalists have a difficult time distinguishing significant facts — facts with consequences — from insignificant ones. That, in turn, comes from not thinking very hard about just which stories are most worth telling." **Bret Stephens**, *Wall Street Journal*

"A newspaper cannot really congratulate itself on having got at the facts impartially when it has quoted at length from two uninformed idiots on opposing sides of an issue." **A.J. Wiggins**, editor-publisher of *The Ellsworth (Maine) American*

## OBJECTIVITY VS. OPINION — HOW TO GIVE LINCOLN HELL

Distorting the news with your opinions is as damaging — and unprofessional — as defacing a photograph. Still need convincing? Read the following excerpt from the *Staunton Spectator*, Oct. 7, 1862. This is how a typical Virginia newspaper reported that President Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation to free the slaves. Here's what results when reporters dispense with facts:

### LINCOLN'S FIENDISH PROCLAMATION

Since the time our first parents were expelled from Paradise, and "They hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow, Through Eden took their solitary way," there has not been as much joy in Pandemonium as at this time. The Arch-Fiend in the regions of woe "grins horribly a ghastly smile," for he and his emissaries upon earth — the extreme abolitionists — have succeeded in prevailing upon "Old Abe" to issue a proclamation of emancipation which will send a thrill of horror through all civilized nations. . . .

Before he committed this act of atrocity, in reply to the Committee sent by a meeting of the "Christians (!) of all denominations" of Chicago, who were, at the instigation of Satan, urging upon him to



perpetrate it, he said that "he had been considering it night and day for some time . . ."

In a word, the devil triumphed, and Lincoln issued his proclamation, which has "crowned the pyramid of his infamies with an atrocity abhorred of men, and at which even demons might shudder."

After the Committee of abolitionists from Chicago had retired, and when he was in some perplexity as to the course he should adopt, Satan, his potential ally, "squat like a toad at his ear," addressed him, as Milton represents Death as addressing Sin within the gates of Hell. . . .

Think you can write a better lead? Try the exercise on page 64.

# The five W's

Facts usually fall into these main groups.

And your success as a journalist depends upon your ability to keep your facts straight. In the early 1900s, cards were posted in the newsroom of Joseph Pulitzer's New York World that shouted:

**ACCURACY! ACCURACY! ACCURACY!  
WHO? WHAT? WHERE? WHEN? HOW?  
THE FACTS — THE COLOR — THE FACTS!**

Now, you can argue about the number of W's here. (Are there four? Or five? Does "how" count as a W?) But you can't argue that good journalism combines facts and color, as Pulitzer observed. By "color," he meant description and flavor. But in the example at right, we'll take "color" even more literally:

# WHO WHAT WHEN WHERE WHY

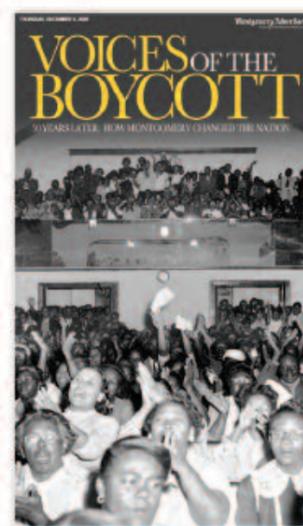
**EXAMPLES OF THE FIVE W'S** in a typical story, with facts color-coded to match the words in the headline at left:

Swimming was prohibited in **Cooper Lake Monday** after a **dangerous amount of algae** was found in the water **last week**.

**Polk County health officials** declared the lake off-limits **because of blue-green algae blooms**. **Ingesting the water can make people ill and kill small pets**.

The restrictions include **windsurfing and sailboarding** but **not boating**.

"We hope it won't last **longer than two or three weeks**," said **Robin Fox, the county's director of environmental health**.



Some news stories happened in the past (*The Beavers lost Friday night's game*). Some will happen in the future (*The Beavers play the Warhogs next week*). And some go on and on, through the past, present and future

## THE WHEN

(*The Beavers are in the midst of a 20-game losing streak. When is it ever going to end?*). Timeliness is essential to every story. In this media-saturated, 24-hour cable-network-and-online-delivery culture we live in, readers want news that's fresh and immediate. They depend on you to tell them *when* events happened, when events *will* happen and how long they'll last.

Being a reporter, then, means constantly keeping your eyes on the clock, for two reasons:

- 1) so you can include the "when" in every story, and
- 2) so you can finish every story before deadline.

◀ **THIS SPECIAL SECTION** from the *Montgomery (Ala.) Advertiser*, published on the 50th anniversary of the *Montgomery Bus Boycott*, examines life in the 1950s, a key period in civil rights history.

### EMPHASIZING THE "WHEN" ANGLE:

*This story from the Las Vegas Review-Journal is all about holidays, so it begins:*

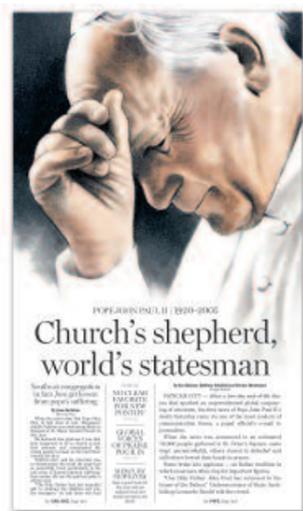
Clark County public school students don't go to class on Labor Day, Nevada Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Presidents Day or Memorial Day.

In the past, they've had to go to school on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, when it fell on a school day.

This year, the district's 258,000 students will have Monday off because administrators deliberately scheduled the first of four teacher training days to coincide with Yom Kippur. . . .

*Here's how a British newspaper starts a story headlined, "The twilight angels who come out after hours":*

While most of us are just settling down for a night in front of the TV at seven o'clock in the evening, for a special team of Plymouth nurses work is only just beginning. . . .



No, we're not talking about that legendary 1960s rock group, The Who — although we *could* be, if we were writing a story about classic rockers. And that story might be popular, too, because readers love stories that focus on

## THE WHO

people: Celebrities. Movers and shakers. The rich and powerful. The weird and wacky. Reporters generally love writing "people profiles," too, because it's so fun to interview fascinating folks. Journalism provides a perfect excuse for letting you ask intimate questions of total strangers.

When you start assembling facts for even the hardest hard-news story, always look for the "who" elements: Who's involved? Who's affected? Who's going to benefit? Who's getting screwed? No matter how abstract the topic, it's the "who" angle that keeps it real.

◀ **THIS OBITUARY** from the *San Jose Mercury News* explains who *Pope John Paul II* was, who's mourning his death around the world and who might replace him as the next pope.

### EMPHASIZING THE "WHO" ANGLE:

*This lead from the Medford (Ore.) Mail Tribune makes it instantly clear what the story's about:*

A self-described miser who drank outdated milk, lived in an unheated house and held up his second-hand pants with a bungee cord has left a \$9 million legacy that will benefit Southern Oregon social service agencies.

*This feature story centers on a number of "whos" — film critics, film characters and film actors:*

The Online Film Critics Society, an international association of Internet-based cinema journalists, is sharing its love with the character we're supposed to hate.

The society has announced its new list celebrating the Top 100 Villains of All Time.

The greatest screen villain, according to the 132 members, is Darth Vader, played by David Prowse and voiced by James Earl Jones in the original "Star Wars" trilogy.



The bigger the news organization, the broader its coverage area. USA Today, for example, calls itself "The Nation's Newspaper," and it covers the entire world.

But most American newspapers are small dailies and weeklies that focus exclusively on their cities, counties or school campuses. Which means the "where" of every

## THE WHERE

story is crucial: the closer the event, the more relevant it will be to readers.

But explaining the "where" of a story isn't always easy. That's why the more complex a topic is, the more you need to supplement your reporting with visuals such as a map (*Where will they build the new airport?*), a diagram (*Where will they expand the gym?*) or a photo (*Where did police find the body?*).

◀ **THIS TRAVEL STORY** from *The Oregonian* focuses on a specific place — *Costa Maya* — relying on maps, photos and detailed description to paint a picture for would-be visitors.

### EMPHASIZING THE "WHERE" ANGLE:

*This story from the Washington Post immediately transports you to a dramatic destination:*

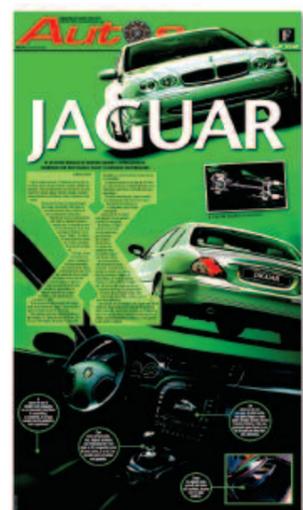
Fishermen call it the "Hell Hole," this place of whistling winds and smashing waves in the north Atlantic Ocean. Above a chasm in the Northeast Channel, which runs between the submerged Georges and Browns banks off Nova Scotia, fishermen catch cod, haddock and other fish with hooks at the ends of long lines, and by dragging nets along the sea floor.

"It takes guts to fish 'Hell Hole,'" said Sanford Atwood, a 54-year-old fisherman who has braved Hell Hole's elements aboard his boat, the *Ocean Legend*. . . .

*And here's a classic "where" lead by Bob Batz:*

When it comes to advertising the location of its monthly meetings, the Global Positioning System Users Group is different than most groups.

They gather on the fourth Thursday of the month at N 40 37 18 W 80 02 50 W. . . .



What's "what"? It's the stuff that news is *about* — events and ideas, projects and problems, dollars and disasters. And it's your job, as a journalist, to monitor and explain the stuff that matters most to your readers, whether you

## THE WHAT

find it in a classroom, dig it up on a government beat or watch it on a football field. Now, here's something you may not have realized before: The "what" gives news its substance; the "who" gives news its humanity and personality. Why does that matter? Because news stories become dry and dull when they focus too much on, say, meetings and money (the "what") and forget to connect them to real people (the "who"). Which is one reason why business reports and scientific papers are so boring: They're all "what" and no "who."

◀ **THIS CAR REVIEW** from *La Voz* is unconcerned with who, when or where. It's all about what the car looks like, what its features are, what works, what doesn't — and what everything costs.

### EMPHASIZING THE "WHAT" ANGLE:

*Notice how this USA Today business story begins with a list of famous "whats":*

The Empire State Building. The SUV. The Incredible Hulk. The Boeing 747.

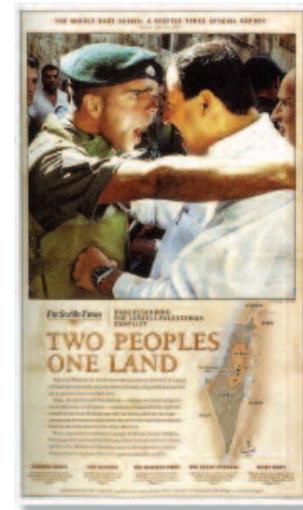
When it comes to big, no place does it better than the USA. But after a 34-year run, one of these icons is starting to see its popularity fade.

The 747 — synonymous with "huge" as the world's largest commercial jetliner — is increasingly being pushed out of airline fleets worldwide for being too expensive to operate and too hard to fill. . . .

*Here's a Toronto Star story about a pop-culture trend:*

Plastic surgery reality shows are setting a frightening example, bringing the practice of cosmetic surgery into disrepute, doctors say.

"It is barbaric, the whole premise of changing the way they look completely," says Dr. Frank Lista. "It's turned plastic surgery into a freak show." . . .



Good journalism reports the news; great journalism explains it. And explaining the news requires asking, over and over, the question

## THE WHY

"why": *Why is this law necessary? Why will it cost so much?* And most important of all: *Why should we care?*

When news breaks suddenly, finding the explanations for events can be difficult. But for most stories, remember, the "why" is what makes the news meaningful.

◀ **THIS SPECIAL SECTION** from *The Seattle Times* explains the causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



Good reporters are good teachers. They know how to explain things in a clear, concise way. And explaining the "how" of a story often

## THE HOW

requires detailed explanation: *How will this plan work? How did that prisoner escape? How do I decorate my dog for Halloween?*

For short stories and news briefs, the "how" is often omitted to save space. But readers love a good "how-to" story, especially in the feature section.

▶ **THIS FEATURE STORY** from the *Marion Chronicle-Tribune* provides a beginner's guide to doing the laundry.

# The inverted pyramid

This newswriting format summarizes the most important facts at the very start of the story.

It may seem like an obvious idea to us nowadays — getting *right to the point* when you start a story — but it didn't occur to most reporters until midway through the 19th century. For example, here's the lead from a Fourth of July story in the Massachusetts Centinel in 1785:

Monday last, being the anniversary of the ever-memorable day, on which the illustrious Congress declared the then Colonies of North-America to be Free, Sovereign and Independent States, all ranks of citizens participated in the celebration of the happy event, and even Nature put on more than usual mildness, expressive of her joy on the occasion — Ere the Eastern ocean was yet bordered with the saffron hue, the feathered choristers sang their early matin, and to usher in the auspicious day, Aurora unbarred the ruddy gates of the morn, with sympathetic smiles.

Flowery enough for you? By 1898, however, the Chicago Tribune was opening stories this way:

QUANTANAMO BAY, Cuba — The first heavy fighting at close quarters between the American marines and the Spaniards took place here today.

As usual, American pluck and discipline won. The little invading force showed splendid courage and spirit. . . .

What changed? Sentences got shorter. Writing got tighter. And reporters developed a formula for compressing the most newsworthy facts — the who, what, when, where, why — into the opening paragraphs of a story. That formula lives on today. It's known as the *inverted pyramid*.



According to newspaper folklore, the inverted pyramid was first developed during the Civil War by correspondents like these from the New York Herald. Reporters transmitted their battlefield stories via telegraph, which was expensive and unreliable. Stories could be cut off in mid-sentence, before the reporter had gotten around to saying who'd won the battle. So frustrated editors started urging writers to file fact-filled summaries of their stories *FIRST*, then fill in the lengthier details. Before long, the inverted pyramid became the standard structure for most news stories.

## WHY, IT DOES SORT OF LOOK LIKE AN UPSIDE-DOWN PYRAMID, DOESN'T IT?

The problem is this: How do you structure a news story so that readers quickly understand what's going on — without having to read a mile of text?

The answer: Summarize first. Explain later.

Whenever you write a story, you have to decide how to stack the facts. One solution, used for centuries by storytellers, is to stack facts *chronologically*: first one thing happened, which caused another thing to happen, which caused something else to happen, and then the princess married the prince. The End.

Sure, those types of stories are entertaining, but only if you stick with them from start to finish — which makes them an annoyingly slow, inefficient way to deliver breaking news. See for yourself:

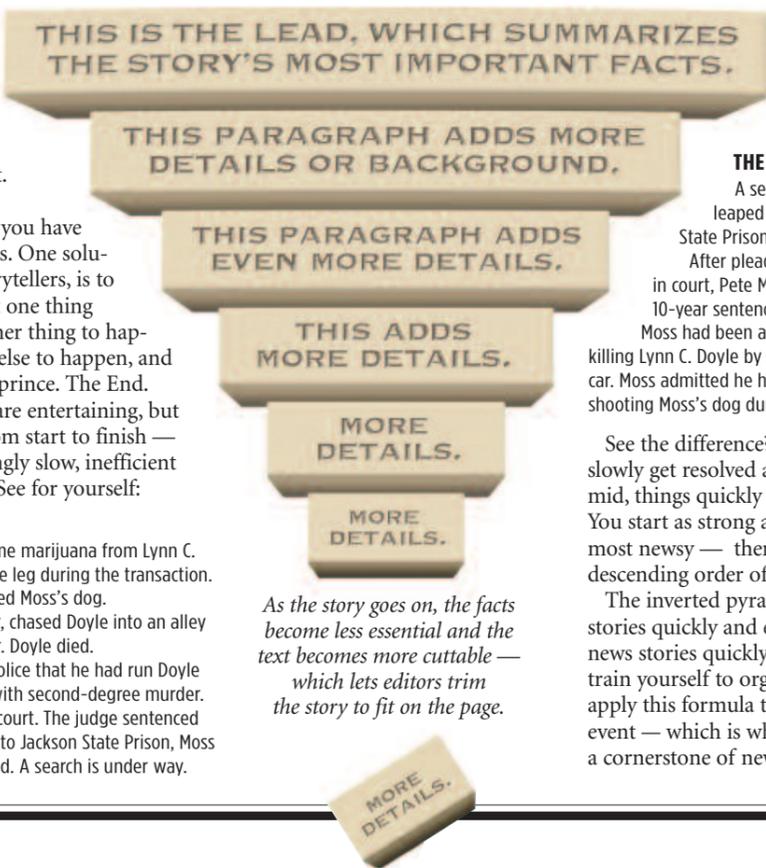
### THE CHRONOLOGICAL STORY

On Sept. 20, Pete Moss bought some marijuana from Lynn C. Doyle. But Moss's dog bit Doyle in the leg during the transaction. So Doyle grabbed a shotgun and killed Moss's dog.

Moss was furious. He got in his car, chased Doyle into an alley and crushed him against a dumpster. Doyle died.

The next day, Moss confessed to police that he had run Doyle over. He was arrested and charged with second-degree murder.

Yesterday, Moss pleaded guilty in court. The judge sentenced him to 10 years in prison. On his way to Jackson State Prison, Moss leaped from a police van and escaped. A search is under way.



As the story goes on, the facts become less essential and the text becomes more cuttable — which lets editors trim the story to fit on the page.

To tell that same story using the inverted pyramid, you'd stack the facts in the *opposite* order, putting the final facts first:

### THE INVERTED PYRAMID STORY

A search is under way for a criminal who leaped from a police van outside of Jackson State Prison yesterday.

After pleading guilty to second-degree murder in court, Pete Moss was on his way to begin serving a 10-year sentence when he escaped.

Moss had been arrested Sept. 21 after confessing to killing Lynn C. Doyle by running him over in an alley with his car. Moss admitted he had been furious with Doyle for shooting Moss's dog during a marijuana deal.

See the difference? In chronological stories, things slowly get resolved at the *end*. In the inverted pyramid, things quickly get summed up at the *beginning*. You start as strong as you can, summarizing what's most newsworthy — then you add additional facts in descending order of importance.

The inverted pyramid helps readers scan news stories quickly and efficiently. But it helps you *write* news stories quickly and efficiently, too. Once you train yourself to organize facts this way, you can apply this formula to almost any breaking news event — which is why the inverted pyramid has been a cornerstone of newswriting for the past century.

## HOW A TYPICAL NEWS STORY USES THE INVERTED PYRAMID

As we've seen, the main advantages of the inverted pyramid are:

- ◆ It condenses information efficiently, so readers can grasp facts quickly.
- ◆ It allows editors to trim stories from the bottom, since the details in the text become gradually less essential. Now, reporters certainly *don't* want their stories cut carelessly (or prematurely). But sometimes it's necessary. Take this wire story, for instance. It could be cut after the second paragraph. Or the third. Or . . .

Here's the main point of the story, engagingly summarized. Notice how the lead is crafted to start with the "who" of the story, a name you'll recognize: Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The second paragraph elaborates on the "birthday gift" mentioned in the lead. It also adds more details about the "when" and "where."

The third paragraph fills in the rest of the "what" details, describing the stamp and the series it's a part of.

This final paragraph supplies relevant but less essential background information: a quick recap of Schwarzenegger's stamp-worthy career and his latest Austria connection. Is there more to this story? We don't need it. This is enough.

VIENNA, Austria — California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is getting a birthday gift from his home country: a stamp in his honor.

The Austrian post office announced on its Web site that the \$1.25 stamp will be released on the actor-turned-politician's birthday, July 30. Schwarzenegger, who will be 57, was born in the Austrian village of Thal near the southern city of Graz.

The stamp — which shows Schwarzenegger in a suit and tie, with the U.S. and Austrian flags in the background — is part of a collectors series called "Austrians living abroad," the post office said.

Schwarzenegger moved to the United States in 1968 to pursue a career as a body builder and movie star. He made his first visit to Austria as California governor last weekend, when he represented the United States at the state funeral of President Thomas Klestil.

— The Associated Press

## SO SHOULD YOU USE THIS FORMAT FOR EVERY STORY?

Not every journalist is a fan of the inverted pyramid. Writing coach Don Fry called it "the worst form ever invented by the human race for explaining anything in words." And Bruce DeSilva of The Hartford Courant once complained that "the inverted pyramid remains the Dracula of journalism. It keeps rising from its coffin and sneaking into the paper."

What's the problem? Why do some journalists get so honked off at the inverted pyramid? Two reasons, usually:

- ◆ *It gets repetitive.* And stale. And repetitive. Who wants to read a paper where story after story looks like this?

### THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTS A LESS IMPORTANT FACT AN EVEN DULLER FACT

A BORING FACT  
ZZZ-ZZZ-ZZZ  
BLAH, BLAH,  
BLAH

- ◆ *It doesn't always organize story material logically or engagingly.* If you're not careful, complex stories may start with a bang but end with a whimper as facts stack up and bog down in a "muddle in the middle."

The solution? Don't get lazy; don't let your writing fall into a rut. As we'll explain later, you have a wide range of options for structuring stories and making complex material reader-friendly. ▼ (Take this book, for example. Notice how it combines visuals with short-form writing to keep things interesting.)

Bottom line? The inverted pyramid is valuable for helping you arrange the facts in breaking news stories quickly and efficiently. Will you use it on every story? No. But it's still an essential tool in every reporter's toolbox.

## WHY WRITING A GOOD LEAD ACTUALLY MATTERS TO READERS

No reporter would ever deliberately try to bore or confuse readers. But sometimes it happens: A story takes too long to get going. Readers struggle to make sense of it. They get impatient. They bail.

And that's why it's *crucial* for you to realize how important your lead is. If you take too long to make sense, your readers will flee like rats from a sinking ship. Take the story below, lifted from the front page of a Colorado newspaper. Try making sense of it by reading just the text. By the time the story jumps to page 7, you'll be moaning, *What's the point?* Fortunately for most readers, the headline tells what the story's about long before the writer does.

# Drew Carey, improv group to headline at UCCC

It was just a trip to blow off some steam from the constant pressures of filming "The Drew Carey Show," but Kathy Kinney is glad her cast members made the trip.

Kinney, who plays the mascara-encrusted Mimi on the long-running sitcom that will finally end this summer,



Kinney

attended a comedy improvisational act in Cleveland, and they called for Drew Carey to do the show. Carey didn't feel like it, but he did do some improvisational comedy. And this is where Kinney fit in perfectly.

Kinney, along with another cast member, Ryan Stiles, made their living on improvisational

SEE UCCC, PAGE A7



# Writing basic news leads

It's the essence of journalism: the key facts summarized in a concise way.

Some journalism experts insist that the lead (or "lede") of a story must be *just one paragraph*. And that paragraph must use *just one sentence*. And that sentence must be *25 words or less*. And if you violate that formula, angry readers will scoff. Your story will be doomed.

*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

## HERE'S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN 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. This paper 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 command 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 writers 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 cell phone 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 wordy?** Do readers trip over any 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 in a town near the airport. What's the best lead for that news story? Here are some of the solutions you might create when 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 becoming 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 flat 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 could 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 write a single 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 Friday — but does the date have any major 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 important than the injuries or the lightning?

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. The 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.

**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?

# Beyond the basic news lead

It's not mandatory to begin every story with a roundup of essential facts.

As we've said, for most breaking news events, you need leads that are quick. Factual. Concise. You need leads that summarize the *who-what-when-where-why*. And being able to write solid news leads on deadline is one of the most valuable skills a reporter can possess.

But not every story is a timely news event. Some stories explore social issues. Some profile

interesting people. Some provide previews of coming attractions.

And for those, a basic news lead may be too dull and dry. You may need something livelier, snappier, more creative, a lead that doesn't just summarize, but amuses. Astonishes. Intrigues.

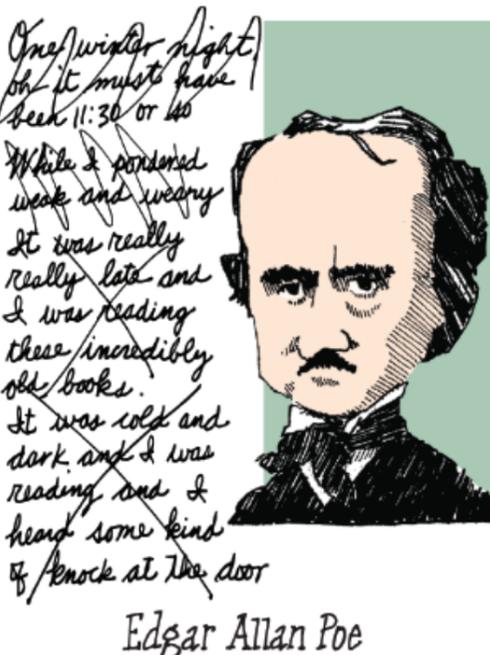
Now, it's impossible to specify *what* kind of story requires *what* kind of lead. That's what makes reporting so creative. When the right story comes along, instead of writing this —

A Hicksville man has been sentenced to life in prison for murdering his girlfriend.

— you might lead with this:

Lincoln Mabry Jr. so loved Becky Kerr that he beat her in the face with a pistol barrel and shot her to death.

Over the years, reporters have devised dozens of oddball names for offbeat leads: pssts, zingers, sing-alongs, riddle-posers, God-Only-Knows. Call them whatever you like; the fact is, all good reporters spend countless hours searching for the Perfect Lead. Now it's your turn.



## ONE OF THE LONGEST (AND MOST MEMORABLE) LEADS EVER WRITTEN

After a surprisingly warm March day in 1995, feature writer Ken Fuson wrote this piece in The Des Moines Register. One sentence, 290 words. Gimmicky, yes. But irresistible.

Here's how Iowa celebrates a 70-degree day in the middle of March: By washing the car and scooping the loop and taking a walk; by day-dreaming in school and playing hooky at work and shutting off the furnace at home; by skateboarding and flying kites and digging through closets for baseball gloves; by riding that new bike you got for Christmas and drawing hopscotch boxes in chalk on the sidewalk and not caring if the kids lost their mittens again; by looking for robins and noticing swimsuits on department store mannequins and shooting hoops in the park; by sticking the ice scraper in the trunk and the antifreeze in the garage and leaving the car parked outside overnight; by cleaning the barbecue and stuffing the parka in storage and just standing outside and letting that friendly sun kiss



your face; by wondering where you're going to go on summer vacation and getting reacquainted with neighbors on the front porch and telling the boys that — yes! yes! — they can run outside and play without a jacket; by holding hands with a lover and jogging in shorts and picking up the extra branches in the yard; by eating an ice cream cone outside and (if you're a farmer or gardener) feeling that first twinge that says it's time to plant and (if you're a high school senior) feeling that first twinge that says it's time to leave; by wondering if in all of history there has ever been a day so glorious and concluding that there hasn't and being afraid to even stop and take a breath (or begin a new paragraph) for fear that winter would return, leaving Wednesday in our memory as nothing more than a sweet and too-short dream.

Dead.

That's what the man was when they found him with a knife in his back at 4 p.m. in front of Riley's saloon at the corner of 52nd and 12th Streets.

James Thurber was a popular humorist and cartoonist in the mid-20th century. He started out as a newspaper reporter, where an editor told him to write shorter, more dramatic leads — which prompted Thurber to begin a murder story this way:

## ... AND ONE OF THE SHORTEST LEADS EVER WRITTEN

### QUOTED

"Every story must have a beginning. A lead. Incubating the lead is a cause of great agony. Why is no mystery. Based on the lead, a reader makes a critical decision: 'Shall I go on?'"

**Rene Cappon**,  
author of *The Associated Press Guide to Newswriting*

"The best day is one when I can write a lead that will cause a reader at his breakfast table next morning to spit up his coffee, clutch at his heart and shout, 'My God! Martha, did you read this?'"

**Edna Buchanan**,  
legendary police reporter

"Always grab the reader by the throat in the first paragraph, sink your thumbs into his windpipe in the second, and hold him against the wall until the tag line."

**Paul O'Neil**,  
writer

"If you don't hit a newspaper reader between the eyes with your first sentence, there is no need of writing a second one."

**Arthur Brisbane**,  
19th-century yellow journalist

"I've always been a believer that if I've got two hours in which to do something, the best investment I can make is to spend the first hour and 45 minutes of it getting a good lead, because after that everything will come easily."

**Don Wycliff**,  
Chicago Tribune

"I don't look at my leads as a chance to show off my flowery writing. My leads are there to get you in and to keep you hooked to the story so that you can't go away."

**Mitch Albom**,  
sports columnist, *Detroit Free Press*

"The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn't induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead. And if the second sentence doesn't induce him to continue to the third, it's equally dead."

**William Zinsser**,  
author, *On Writing Well*

## THE CITY INSTALLS NEW PARKING METERS. WHAT KIND OF LEAD SHOULD YOU WRITE?

The city council met Tuesday. The proposal: install parking meters on Boinck Street, the road that runs alongside the school campus, where students have always parked for free. Angry students argued against the plan: "It's just greedy," said Dan DeLyon. "It's slimy," said Isabelle Ringing. "It's a stab in the back," said May K. Fist.

"It's long overdue," said the mayor, and the measure passed. Effective Jan. 1, the meters will cost 50 cents an hour — and parking violations will result in a \$50 ticket.

Suppose you're covering this story for the campus newspaper. What kind of lead would you write? A basic news lead? Or something more provocative? Here are some options:

The city council met Tuesday to discuss . . .

Wait! Stop! This is boring. What's the *news*? Try again:

A proposal to install parking meters on Boinck Street was a topic of hot debate at Tuesday's city council meeting.

Still too dull. Why? It misses the point. The *proposal* isn't the story. The *meeting* isn't the story. The *impact on your readers* is the story. That's got to be the main emphasis.

Students will pay to park on Boinck Street starting Jan. 1, thanks to a measure passed by the city council Tuesday.

Better. It's still a standard news lead, but it does a good job of answering the question, "Why should I care?" (although some editors might challenge the use of the word *thanks*). But must this story use a serious lead? Or could we try:

There's no such thing as a free parking space. Not after Jan. 1, anyway. That's when students will start paying 50 cents an hour to park on Boinck Street.

Clever? Or cliché? This lead adds some extra attitude, but is it too much? And should it say "students will start paying" — or "you will start paying"? If you like the idea of aiming this story at "you the student reader," then how about:

Starting Jan. 1, it'll cost you \$50 if your parking meter expires on Boinck Street. Happy New Year.

Is it OK to featurize the lead like that? If so, why not show how the parking plan would affect a typical student —

Dan DeLyon's job at Stinky's Pizza barely pays him enough to gas up his '87 Camaro every day. So starting Jan. 1, he'll be taking the bus to school. "They're sticking meters on Boinck Street," he said. "I can't pay 20 bucks a week to park."

— and then segue into the details of the plan that passed last night. Is that an engaging way to humanize the topic?

"It's long overdue," said mayor Lilac A. Rugg, describing a new measure passed by the city council Tuesday authorizing the installation of parking meters on Boinck Street.

Ugh. A dull quote makes a dull lead — and so do phrases like "authorizing the installation." (Notice, too, how deeply buried the phrase "parking meters" is.) Now, some editors say it's lazy to start *any* lead with a quote. But how about:

"It's slimy," said Isabelle Ringing. "It's just greedy," said Dan DeLyon. "It's a stab in the back," said May K. Fist.

During an angry debate at Tuesday's city council meeting, students voiced their anger at a plan to install parking meters on Boinck Street. But the plan passed, and students will start feeding meters Jan. 1.

These quotes are strong, but those student names are a bit distracting (besides, the story's not about them). What if we edited the quotes for greater impact? Like this:

"Slimy."  
"Greedy."  
"A stab in the back."

Students voiced their anger at the city council's plan to install parking meters on Boinck Street on Tuesday. But the plan passed, which means students will start feeding meters Jan. 1.

Those opening quotes now have more punch. But:

- ◆ It sounds like they'll install the parking meters *Tuesday*. That sentence needs rewriting to eliminate confusion.
- ◆ Many editors (and readers) would feel this lead is unfairly negative. It seems to side with the angry students. True? The most effective lead, then, may be one that combines the meters, the meeting and your money. How about:

The meters are coming. Despite opposition from students, the city council approved a new parking plan Tuesday — which means that starting Jan. 1, you'll pay 50 cents an hour to park on Boinck Street.

As you can see, you've got lots of options, depending on your taste and news judgment. Which version would you choose?

### CHECKLIST

◆ **Be concise.** Streamline your ideas, your words, your sentence structure. Think *subject-verb-object*.

The biggest problem with most leads? They're too wordy. Remember, most news leads are just one sentence. Most use fewer than 30 words. That's not an ironclad rule — just an observation based on millions of successful news stories.

◆ **Be accurate.** Get your facts and spelling right. One mistake in the lead will sabotage the entire story.

◆ **Remember what day it is** when readers read your story. If there's a chance of confusion when you write about *tomorrow's concert* or *last night's game*, use the names of the days to be safe.

And speaking of days: Be careful to put the date in the right place.

**Wrong:** *The panel will meet to discuss drug use on Friday.*

**Right:** *The panel will meet on Friday to discuss drug use.*

◆ **Don't name names.** Don't say *John Smith was hit by a bus* in your lead, unless everyone knows who John Smith is. (Don't just say *A man was hit by a bus*, either. Try to add a touch of description, like *An elderly Mudflap man was hit by a bus*.)

◆ **Use strong verbs.** Which means rewriting that sentence above to make it active, not passive: *A bus struck and killed an elderly Mudflap man Tuesday*. . .

Beware of soft, mushy verbs like "be," "try" and "plan" — or dull, bureaucratic verbs like "considered," "met" and "issued." Don't let your leads bog down in meetingspeak. And speaking of meetings:

◆ **Ask "Why should I care?"** Write from the reader's point of view as often as possible. Don't just report — *explain*. Explaining why things matter often makes the best lead.

◆ **Sell the story.** Find out what makes *this* story different or special, and use that to punch up the lead. Who wants to read another ordinary meeting/game/speech story?

◆ **Don't get hung up** by a problem lead. Unsure of how to start the story? Just jot something down and move on. Finish the story, then loop back around and revisit the lead.

◆ **Move attributions to the end of the sentence,** the reporting textbook said. Not: *The reporting textbook said to move attributions to the end of the sentence.* ▼

## HOW TO WRITE A GREAT LEAD



WRITE



TOSS IT OUT



REWRITE



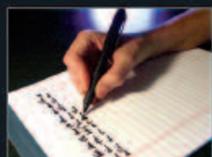
TOSS IT OUT



REWRITE



TOSS IT OUT



REWRITE



TOSS IT OUT



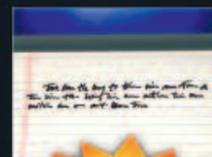
REWRITE



TOSS IT OUT



REWRITE



FINISHED

# Leads that succeed

A roundup of the most popular, commonly used options.

Writing is a creative process, so there's no possible way we could list every conceivable category of lead. (Many have tried; all have failed.) Instead, this collection of favorites is just a beginning. And remember, there's no type of lead that *always works*, just as there's no type of lead that *always fails*. The success of every lead depends on how well you write it. And rewrite it. And rewrite it.



Want more ideas? Browse our collection of inspiring leads scattered throughout **THE MORGUE**

1

## BASIC NEWS LEADS

◆ **The summary lead** begins the majority of news stories by combining the most significant of the five W's into one sentence:

The Pentagon has ordered 1,500 additional troops to Iraq to provide security in advance of the upcoming election, military officials announced Wednesday. — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

◆ **The delayed identification lead** is a type of news lead that withholds a significant piece of information — usually a person's name — until the second paragraph:

A Smallville man escaped injury Saturday after plunging over Wohelo Falls in a kayak. Lance Boyle, 27, was treated for cuts and bruises at Mercy Hospital after what he called a "wild, boneheaded ride."

Spreading the information through two short paragraphs makes it easier to digest than if you crammed it all into one long paragraph.

By structuring that same information a bit differently — still using a delayed-identification lead — the story takes a different tone:

Lance Boyle will never forget the "wild, boneheaded ride" he took Saturday. The Smallville man escaped injury after plunging over Wohelo Falls in a kayak.

Most news stories won't name names in the lead unless they belong to recognizable public figures or celebrities. A lead that does that, however, is called — what else? — an **immediate identification lead**:

Actress Scarlett Johansson was involved in a minor car crash near Disneyland last week while trying to elude photographers.

2

## ANECDOTAL/NARRATIVE LEADS

Some stories unfold slowly, as the writer eases into the topic with an engaging and meaningful anecdote. This **anecdotal lead** begins a story on adult skateboarders:

About five years ago, architect Mark Seder was reading the morning paper and watching his 10-year-old son riding at a local skate park. As he kept looking up from the paper to his son, something dawned on him.

"I realized that I was getting out of shape and I thought, 'Why in the world don't I join him?'" Soon afterward, armed with a board, a helmet, and knee and elbow pads, Seder took his first tentative ride. He was 49 years old.

Today, Seder is 54 and still skating . . . — STEVE WILSON, *Portland Tribune*

Ideally, the anecdote will have a beginning, middle and end; it will be a mini-story with symbolic resonance for the **bigger** story you're about to tell.

Some feature stories begin by dropping you right into the action — action that often continues throughout the entire story. These are called **narrative leads**. If anecdotal leads are like snapshots, narrative leads are movies:

"Oh, Jesus," she moaned softly. She squeezed my hand.

The vacuum machine purred steadily and the fetus that was her unborn child was sucked through a clear plastic hose and into a large glass bottle.

"Oh," she said again, and scratched my forearm. "We're almost done," the doctor said. "I just have to check and make sure you're all clean and empty."

She squeezed my hand harder. . . . — BOB GREENE, from a column called "Kathy's Abortion"

3

## SCENE-SETTER LEADS

In 1941, *Time* magazine wrote a story on America's reaction to the attack on Pearl Harbor. It began with a description:

It was a Sunday morning, clear and sunny. Many a citizen was idly listening to the radio when the flash came that the Japanese had attacked Hawaii. . . .

**Scene-setter leads** lack the urgency of hard-news leads. They're a device borrowed from fiction ("It was a dark and stormy night. . ."), and they're usually reserved for long feature stories, where descriptions of sights, sounds and smells transport you to another place:

The stink. That hits you first. Like a furnace blast. Now notice the mirrors spackled with dried mucous, sweat and spit, the faint arcs of blood that speckle the walls behind the ring. The portrait of Jesus as a boxer watching over the heavy bags. The ring, with its ropes that sag like a sad smile.

It doesn't get any more authentic than an old boxing gym. As real and as honest and as raw as the paint peeling from the walls. . . .

— INARA VERZEMNIEKS, *The Oregonian*

6

## DIRECT ADDRESS LEADS

Virtually all news stories are written in an objective, third-person voice; stories refer to *him, her, they, them*. But feature stories often use the second-person voice to speak directly to *you*, the reader:

If you've been waiting for a chance to collect every episode of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" in one boxed DVD set, you're finally in luck.

For a feature about "missed connection" classified ads, a **direct address lead** may be the best way to explain the story's topic:

You're at a party when you spot a stranger across the room. You feel a spark, a moment when your eyes lock with his. But your friends are tugging at your sleeve, ready to leave, so you head out the door. Now you can't get Mr. Fascinating Stranger out of your mind. Why didn't you just go over and talk? What if he felt the same connection?

Some people don't just wonder — they advertise. . . . — KRISTI TURNQUIST, *The Oregonian*

4

## BLIND LEADS

These are more extreme versions of the **delayed identification leads** mentioned earlier. You deliberately tease readers by withholding a key piece of information, then spring it on them in a subsequent paragraph. Like this:

The most valuable consumers in the apparel business right now are people who carry no cash, have no credit cards and often spit up dinner on their new clothes. They're infants and toddlers — and at a time when sales in many apparel categories are flat, they're fueling a major boom in baby clothes.

— JOHN REINAN, *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis)

Here's a terrific blind lead for a sports story:

First the pale pink nail polish. Then the gold stud earrings and the monogrammed purse.

Is this any way for a football player to dress? It is if she's a girl.

Meet Erin Shilk, 5-foot-3 and 108 pounds: lover of the Aggies, boys, soccer, cooking and chemistry. She's a girl blazing a trail for the '90s. . . .

— BONNIE GANGELHOFF, *The Houston Post*

7

## THE STARTLING STATEMENT

*One in four Americans will be infected with a sexually transmitted disease at some point in their lives.* Did that grab your attention?

That's the goal of the **startling statement** (also called a "zinger" or a "Hey, Martha!"). It's used to begin this story from Romania. We dare you — *try to stop reading*:

Before Toma Petre's relatives pulled his body from the grave, ripped out his heart, burned it to ashes, mixed it with water and drank it, he hadn't been in the news much.

That's often the way it is with vampires here in Romania. Quiet lives, active deaths.

Villagers here are outraged that the police are involved in a simple vampire slaying. After all, vampire slaying is an accepted, though hidden, bit of national heritage, even if illegal.

"What did we do?" pleaded Flora Marinescu, Petre's sister. "If they're right, he was already dead. If we're right, we killed a vampire and saved three lives. Is that so wrong?"

— MATTHEW SCHOFIELD, Knight Ridder Newspapers

5

## ROUNDUP LEADS

Sometimes, instead of focusing on just *one* person, place or thing in the lead, you want to impress the reader with a longer list. Take the **roundup lead** on this legislature story:

Gamblers get more choices. Smokers inhale cheaper cigarettes. And tipplers can hoist a round to Oregon lawmakers who kept state alcohol taxes among the lowest in the nation.

Even gluttons came out OK in the just-ended legislative session, which rejected efforts to require more nutritious school lunches and more time in PE classes.

"Sin had a fabulous session," summed up Sen. Ginny Burdick, D-Portland.

— HARRY ESTEVE, *The Oregonian*

This feature story uses a blind roundup lead:

Sherlock Holmes did it. So did Albert Einstein, Hugh Hefner, Bing Crosby, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, President Gerald Ford and Popeye the Sailor.

Yes, they all discovered the secret of looking smooth, suave and utterly sophisticated: Pipe-smoking.

8

## WORDPLAY LEADS

This catch-all category encompasses a wide range of amusing leads, including bad puns:

For Germans trying to lose weight, the wurst is yet to come.

Or this scene-setter with sound effects:

*Kawhooooooooomp!* The Hell Candidates' twin flame cannons torch off like the burners igniting in a jet engine and flames spike 20 feet up into the lights above the stage of the Paris Theatre.

— JOHN FOYSTON, *The Oregonian*

Or this portrait painted with typography:

Most dogs have upper teeth shaped something like this: VVVVVVVVVVVV.

Buster Finkel, sad-faced pet of Max Finkel, has upper teeth something like this: UUUUUUUUUU.

Or witty wordplay like this, from a story about a mother caught in the middle between the police and the welfare system. Here's how reporter Heather Svokos started that story:

Rock. Susan McQuaide. Hard place.

## ... AND THREE LAZY LEADS YOU SHOULD USUALLY RECONSIDER

◆ **Topic leads.** It's not enough to simply state that a game was played —

The Swamp Toads battled the Mudhogs in a crucial conference playoff Saturday.

— or that a meeting was held:

The school board convened Tuesday night to discuss complaints about the cafeteria.

Those are called **topic leads**. And they're lazy. The news is *not* that a game was played; what matters is the **outcome** of the game. Who won? And yes, the school board met. Big deal. What happened?

Topic leads are weak because they convey no actual news. Instead, they say to readers: *Maybe something happened. Or maybe not. We're trying to decide.*

◆ **Question leads.** Some editors loathe sports stories that begin with questions —

Did the Swamp Toads finally figure out how to reverse the Mudhog curse Saturday?

— or meeting stories, too, for that matter:

What has the school board decided to do to reduce complaints about cafeteria food?

Get. To. The. Point.

Question leads are just weak, irritating stalls — sometimes. But does that make *all* question leads taboo? No. It's possible to craft clever, engaging questions that hook us into reading further. But beware; you may need to convince grumpy editors that a question lead is the best option.

◆ **Quote leads.** Seldom is a quote so terrific that it becomes the smartest, most appealing way to launch a story. Instead, what usually happens is this:

"The cafeteria food is awful, and it costs too much," said sophomore Anne Chovey at the school board meeting Tuesday.

The problem? The quote doesn't fairly summarize the story. It's an opinion, not a fact. We don't immediately know who's speaking. The sentence ends awkwardly.

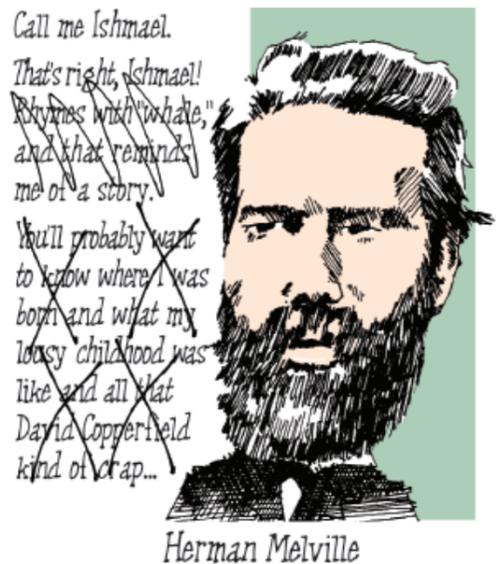
That quote would work well in the second paragraph — following a newsier lead.

# After the lead... what next?

Just write another paragraph. Then add another. And another. . . .

Writers spend lots of time and energy crafting and polishing their leads. Which is good, especially when it forces you to evaluate your material and prioritize your facts.

Yet writing a lead is just the beginning. A lead may hook readers into starting a story; it may brilliantly distill crucial data. But you have to follow the lead with good material, too.



So how do you do that? How do you decide *what* facts go *where*? And *when*? And all those other *W*'s?

It mostly depends on how long the story will be. That's why it's essential to discuss assignments with an editor before you start writing. You may think a story has awesome potential, but your editor may decide it's only worth a 6-inch brief. Or conversely, that innocent-looking little feature story could blossom into a prize-winning epic.

Once you know a story's length, you can estimate how tightly you'll need to condense your material. Some things will fit; others won't. Not a problem: Even the Book of Genesis squeezes the creation of the universe into just seven paragraphs.

And it's got a great lead.

## BRIEFS AND BRITES: NEWS STORIES IN A CONDENSED FORM

Longer briefs may contain five or six paragraphs; if they're bigger than that, they're called *stories*.

Some briefs are written as entertaining little featurettes. They're called *brites*, and they're usually odd or amusing news nuggets told in a humorous or ironic way, as an alternative to ordinary briefs.

Here's an example of each.

**A BRIEF:** Most standard news briefs are written using the inverted pyramid structure: a summary lead followed by additional details in descending order of importance. That's true for this example, as well. It's a typical news brief summarizing the key facts of a local bank robbery.

A man robbed a Lake Grove-area bank Monday, making off with an undisclosed amount of cash. No weapon was seen, and no one was hurt in the incident. According to Lake Oswego police records, a man entered the Key Bank branch at 16210 S.W. Bryant Road about 3:15 p.m. and presented a teller with a note demanding money. The man then left the branch's back door and rode away on a bicycle. Police described the man as in his 20s, about 5 feet 10 inches tall and 180 pounds. He was last seen wearing a baseball or fisherman-type cap, jeans, and a black, long-sleeved, quilted jacket.

**A BRITE:** Brites provide more personality and more comic relief than standard news briefs. The lead tries harder to provoke interest; the ending often serves as a "kicker," providing a whimsical or unusual punch line. The key is keeping everything as short and tight as possible.

It's enough to bring tears — or milk — to your eyes. In Istanbul Wednesday, a Turkish construction worker poured milk into his hand, snorted it up his nose and squirted it 9.2 feet out of his left eye in what he hopes will be recognized as a new world record. "I'm happy and proud that I can get Turkey in the record book even if it's for milk squirting," said Ilker Yilmaz, 28, who is able to perform the unusual feat because of an anomaly in his tear gland. Guinness World Records will officially verify Yilmaz's record after reviewing documents from witnesses at the event, which was sponsored by Kay Sut, a Turkish milk company.

## THE SECOND PARAGRAPH (THE NUT GRAF) AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

As we've seen, there are basically two types of leads:

- 1) Those that summarize the story, getting *right to the point*, and
- 2) Those that don't.

Now, there's nothing wrong with writing a punchy lead that teases or amuses readers. Like this:

Want to live longer? Have another beer.

Fun stuff! But readers will quickly ask, *What's this story about?* Which is why the next paragraph says:

Researchers from Laube University say beer has antioxidant boosters that could help fight cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

Aha! Now we see.

That paragraph — the one that condenses the story idea into a nutshell — is called the *nut graf*. And it's vital.

Without a nut graf, impatient readers may wonder *What's the point?* and drift away, no matter how clever your lead is.



### MUST EVERY STORY CONTAIN A NUT GRAF, THEN?

No. Nut graf's are helpful for feature stories (see examples at right). But for news stories, your second or third paragraph may have other duties to perform. You may need it *to supplement any of the five W's missing from the lead*:

A Salem golfer is recovering after being hit by lightning Friday morning. Wally Benson, 53, is in fair condition at Mercy Hospital after being knocked unconscious on the third hole of Salem Golf Club during a sudden thunderstorm.

Or *to provide background for the action described in the lead*:

Electricity was finally restored for 3,000 shivering Loften residents Friday. Repair crews worked for more than 72 hours after Monday night's ice storm downed dozens of power lines.

Or *to add a supporting quote*:

It's official: Ferris Wheeler, the Stars' star shortstop, is out for the season. "My doctor said he's never seen a wrist as badly shattered as mine," said Wheeler, who was hit by a pitch in Saturday's game against Lincoln.



## THE PARTS OF A STORY: HOW TO ORGANIZE YOUR FACTS EFFECTIVELY

You've written a terrific lead. You've added a solid nut graf. Congratulations. Now what?

Try outlining your story. Review your notes. Organize your material into sections. Then try sequencing those sections in different orders to see what's most logical.

For instance, suppose a college is debating whether to ban dogs on the school grounds. Here's two different ways to organize that story. Both work fine. Which do you prefer?

**How to read these stories:** In the first story (left), we labeled each paragraph **A**, **B**, **C**, **D**, etc. In the second story, notice how we've rearranged those same paragraphs.

**VERSION ONE** Here's a straightforward story written as an inverted pyramid. (Notice how you could cut the text after paragraphs E, G or H.) As you read the story, pay attention to its structure. Does the material flow logically from point to point?

**THE LEAD**  
A humorous approach to the dog problem.

**THE NUT GRAF**  
This is the essence — the *so what?* — of the story: *Dogs may soon be outlawed.*

**THE PROTESTER**  
We now hear from an anti-dog spokesman who addresses the *why* question.

**RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**  
This describes *when* and *how* students and staff are reacting.

**SIMS QUOTE #1**  
To balance the argument, Juliet now expresses the views of student dog owners.

**SIMS QUOTE #2**  
With quotes this juicy, we're happy to let her keep talking. . . .

**SIMS QUOTE #3**  
Another juicy, dramatic sound bite.

**THE CURRENT LAW**  
This provides more context about pet rules on campus.

**WHAT NEXT?**  
We finish by sending readers to the big meeting.

**A** Dog poop. It's everywhere: on the sidewalk, on the lawn, on the soles of your shoes.

**B** But that may soon change. The Bilford College board of trustees, in response to hundreds of complaints, is considering a new regulation declaring the campus off-limits to dogs.

**C** Ferris Wheeler, president of Students Against Dogs (SAD), has collected nearly 300 signatures on a petition calling for a campus dog ban. "This stinks," Wheeler says. "I mean, this school smells like dog doo. Irresponsible pet owners are letting their dogs chase cyclists, bark and crap all over campus."

**D** Last week, the school's landscaping crew — which students call the "poop patrol" — tried posting signs saying "NO DOGS ALLOWED." Students tore them down. Tempers have started to flare.

**E** "This proposal is ugly and unfair to responsible dog owners like me," says junior Juliet Sims. "I admit there's too much poop on the sidewalks, but it's wrong to let a few bad apples ruin it for everybody."

**F** Sims lives off-campus with a golden retriever named Romeo. "He's my sweetie," she says. "He sleeps with me, eats with me, showers with me. He even goes to class with me."

**G** A ban on dogs would pose a painful dilemma for dog-lovers like Sims. "I hate locking Romeo up all day," she says. "I'd rather quit this stupid school."

**H** Campus regulations currently require all dogs to be leashed, but the rule is rarely enforced. And while pets are prohibited in campus dormitories, no law has ever banned them from school grounds.

**I** To resolve the dispute, the board will hold a public hearing at 7 p.m. Thursday in Bilford Union, Room 11.

**VERSION TWO** This story uses all of Version One's material but arranges the paragraphs in a different order to produce a different effect. Notice how this version begins and ends with Juliet, the dog owner. Does this structure seem more appealing?

Juliet loves Romeo. "He's my sweetie," she says. "He sleeps with me, eats with me, showers with me. He even goes to class with me."

But that may soon change. The Bilford College board of trustees, in response to hundreds of complaints, is considering a new regulation declaring the campus off-limits to dogs.

Which means that Juliet Sims may have to bid farewell to Romeo, her golden retriever, whenever she goes to school. "This proposal is ugly and unfair to responsible dog owners like me," says Sims, a junior living off campus. "I admit there's too much poop on the sidewalks, but it's wrong to let a few bad apples ruin it for everybody."

Campus regulations currently require all dogs to be leashed, but the rule is rarely enforced. And while pets are prohibited in campus dormitories, no law has ever banned them from school grounds.

But lately, some anti-dog activists have started to bark. Ferris Wheeler, president of Students Against Dogs (SAD), has collected nearly 300 signatures on a petition calling for a campus dog ban.

"This stinks," Wheeler says. "I mean, this school smells like dog doo. Irresponsible pet owners are letting their dogs chase cyclists, bark and crap all over campus."

Last week, the school's landscaping crew — which students call the "poop patrol" — tried posting signs saying "NO DOGS ALLOWED." Students tore them down. Tempers have started to flare.

To resolve the dispute, the board will hold a public hearing at 7 p.m. Thursday in Bilford Union, Room 11.

A ban on dogs would pose a painful dilemma for dog-lovers like Juliet Sims. "I hate locking Romeo up all day," she says. "I'd rather quit this stupid school."

**THE LEAD/ SIMS QUOTE #2**  
This lead starts the story with a more human angle.

**THE NUT GRAF**

**SIMS QUOTE #1**  
Now the reader gets the joke: Romeo is . . . a dog! This device is called a *blind lead* — where readers have to wait a few paragraphs for the setup to pay off.

**THE CURRENT LAW**  
This info now appears sooner than it did in the previous story.

**THE PROTESTER**  
Notice how the anti-dog argument comes later in this version. Does that seem to tilt the story in favor of Juliet? Is it fair?

**RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**  
Notice how the line about "tempers" leads into the next paragraph.

**WHAT NEXT?**

**SIMS QUOTE #3**  
Like closing a circle, the story ends where it began: with Juliet. ▼