

Writing For The Penmen Press



Contributors: Christopher Arnold, Tony Cook, Elizabeth Angeli
– Purdue University /Purdue Online Writing Lab <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/735/05/>

Objectivity: Sticking to the five W's

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.

“H”

NY Times/Wall St. Journal articles

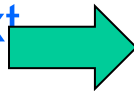
Are the 5W's as obvious in your articles?



The five W's

The WHO

- Readers love stories that focus on people
- WHO keeps it real
 - Who's involved?
 - Who's affected?
 - Who's going to benefit?
 - Who's getting
 - Who's Next



The WHAT

- WHAT gives news its substance
 - Stories become dry and dull if they focus too much on WHAT
 - Need WHO



The five W's

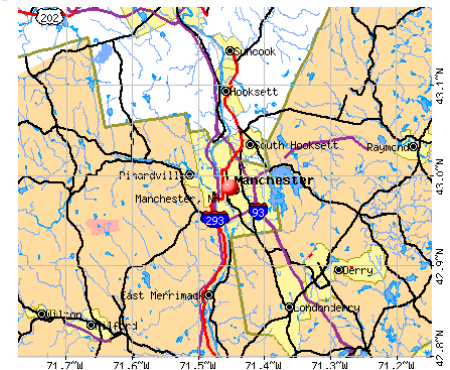
The WHEN



- Timeliness essential to every story
 - When events happened or will happen
 - How long they lasted or will last

The WHERE

- The closer the event, the more relevant it is for readers
- Many stories require supplements
 - Maps



The five W's

The WHY



- Finding explanations difficult
- The WHY is what makes news meaningful

The HOW

- Often requires detailed explanation
- Sometimes omitted to save space
- Readers love “how-to” stories

The Inverted Pyramid

Newswriting format summarizes most important facts at story's start

This is the lead, which summarizes the story's most important facts

This paragraph adds more details or background

This paragraph adds even more details

This adds more details

More details



FORMATTING

□ Paragraphs:

- Short (3-4 sentences max, typically 1-2)
- One-sentence paragraphs are very common
- Start a new paragraph at ANY transition – people, places, timing, sources, etc.

□ Headlines:

- Informative, “outline” format - not full sentences
- Bold type, initial caps or all caps, centered
- No punctuation at end of headlines
- Short enough to Tweet



What Is A Lead?

The lead, or opening paragraph, is the most important part of a news story. *Think Inverted Pyramid*

What Is A Lead?



Information overload and short attention spans means your audience won't read beyond the first paragraph unless you grab their interest

What Is A Lead?

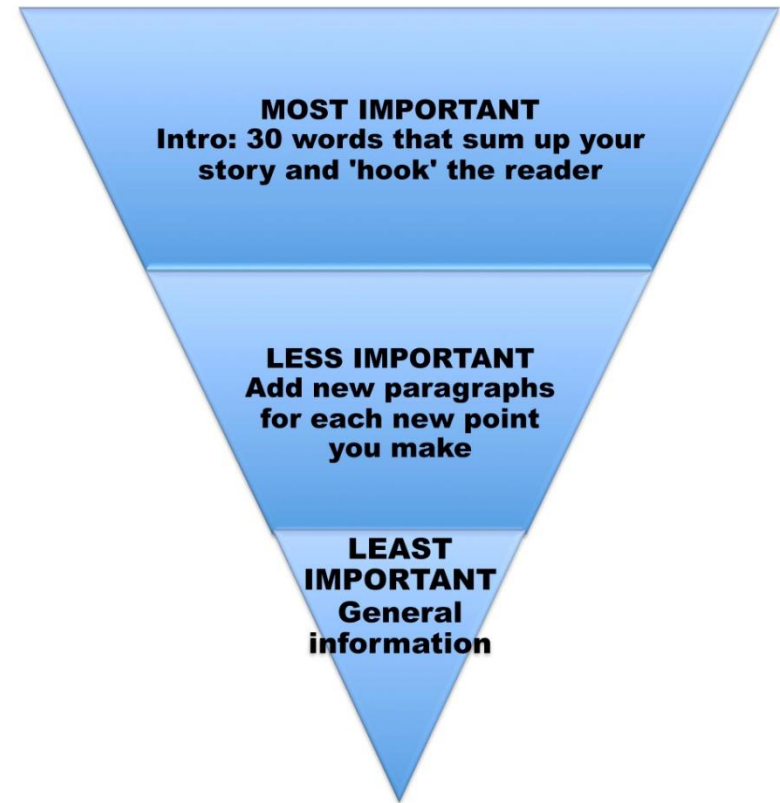
- Good leads gives readers the most important information in a clear, concise and interesting manner
- It also establishes the voice and direction of an article



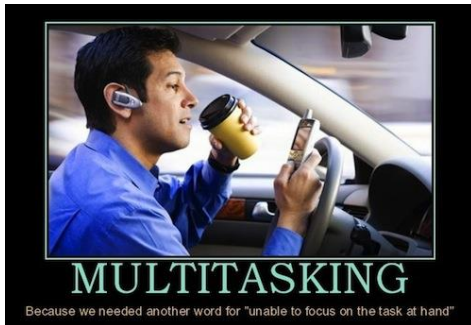
How To Write A Lead

- The Five W's and H:
Decide which aspect of the story – who, what, when, where, why, how – is most important
- Emphasize those aspects
- Less important aspects can wait until 2nd or 3rd sentence/paragraph

The inverted pyramid



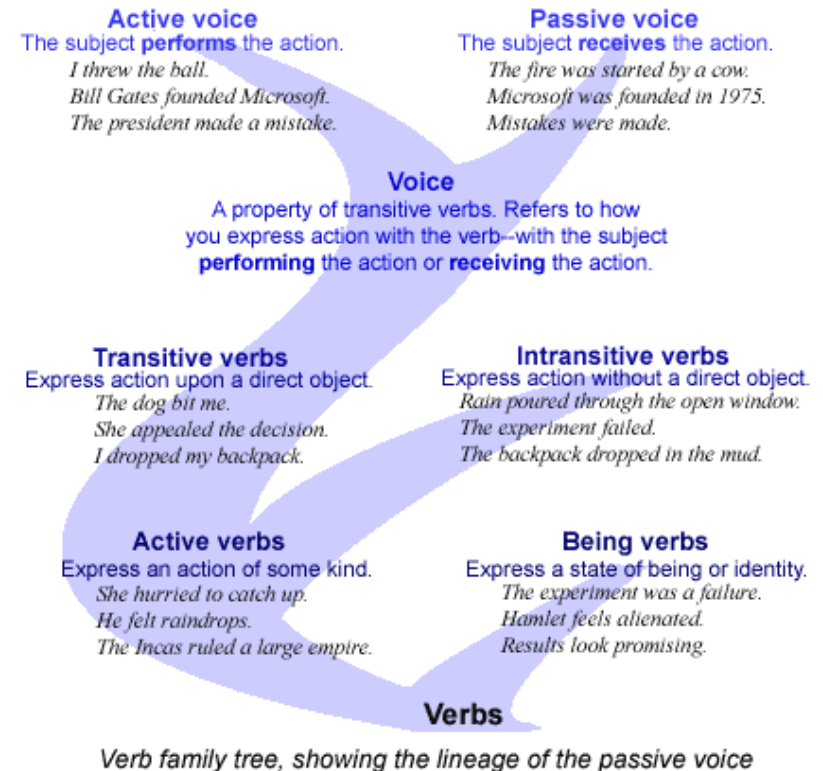
How To Write A Lead



- Summarize, but try to be specific
- A lead that's too broad won't be informative or interesting
- Leads are often one or two sentences. Usually about 25 to 30 words -- rarely be more than 40
- Readers want to know why the story matters to *them*. They won't wait for the answer. Be concise

How To Write A Lead

- Active sentences: Strong verbs make leads interesting
- Passive language is dull and leaves out important information, such as the person or thing that caused the action
- Incomplete reporting is often due to passive leads





How To Write A Lead

- What does the reader already know? In today's media culture, most readers become aware of breaking news as it happens
- Your lead should do more than merely regurgitate yesterday's news



Things To Avoid In A Lead

- Flowery language: Don't overuse adverbs and adjectives in the lead. Using strong verbs and nouns
- Unnecessary words or phrases: Watch out for unintentional redundancy
 - I.e: "2 p.m. Wednesday afternoon" or "very unique." Don't waste space, especially in the lead. Get to the point
- Formulaic leads: Readers want information, but they also want to be entertained. Leads must sound genuine, not just mechanical
- It: Don't start leads with the word "it." Imprecise and disorients readers



Types Of Leads

- Summary lead: Traditional news lead. Often used for breaking news
 - A story about a student government vote might use this “just the facts” approach
 - Straight news leads tend to provide answers to the most important three or four of the Five W’s and H
 - Typically used to convey who, what, when and where

Summary Lead - Example

Lobbyists Flout Disclosure Rules In Talks With Commissioners

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

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

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

Summary Lead - Example

County Administrator Faces Ouster

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

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

- Commentary: Traditional who, what and when. If this information had been reported on TV or radio the day before, this lead might not be a good one for the print edition of the newspaper. If the reporter posted this information online as soon as it became available, then this lead would make sense. It's brief (15 words) and uses an active sentence construction



THE ANECDOTE

Anecdotes are short narratives that add 'human interest'

Types Of Leads

- Anecdotal lead: Sometimes, beginning a story with a quick anecdote can draw in readers
 - Anecdote must be interesting and must closely illustrate the article's broader point
 - Specificity and concrete detail are essential. The broader significance of the anecdote should be explained within the first few sentences following the lead

Anecdotal Lead - Example

Tri-staters Tell Stories Of The Devastating Tsunami

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

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

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

Question Lead - Example

Same Lobbyist For Courts, Shorter Term, More Money

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

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

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

- Commentary: Question leads can grab attention, not as clear and concise about providing the main point of a story. In this case, the second paragraph must carry a lot of the weight
- JB thinks it looks like advertising copy!

Punctuation

- Exclamation points - minimal use or it's ad copy
- Commas - before connecting words that connect two complete thoughts; before and after constrictive clauses. Commas are your friend!
- Hyphen - use care and a dictionary
- Quotation marks - punctuation ALWAYS goes *inside* quotation marks
- Follow your Writing/Style Guide! If it's in there, you're expected to know it!

Headline Writing

- Whether it's the title of a release or email subject line, keep it clear, concise, and compelling
- Aim for 55 characters or less – leave enough room for a URL and retweeting!
- A headline must be:
 - **Unique.** What's so different about your news?
 - **Urgent.** Why does your news matter to me right now?
 - **Useful.** How will your news help me?
 - **Unambiguous/specific.** What can I learn just from the headline?

Source: http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/How_to_write_great_headlines_in_55_characters_or_f_46030.aspx#

Headline Writing

Let's try one: SNHU is going to feature a Cardi B and Post Malone tribute band at SNHUstock

You could write a fairly bland headline like:

SNHUstock Coming March 23



Headline Writing

SNHUstock Coming March 30

- Is it unique? Maybe. It's hard to tell
- Is it urgent? Definitely not
- Is it useful? Maybe, maybe not
- Is it unambiguous? Again, maybe, maybe not. It depends on whether the words mean anything to you
- Can you tweet it? Yes, but who cares?



Headline Writing

Post Malone And Cardi Tributes To Headline SNHUstock

- **Unique?** How many schools get Posty and Cardi?
- **Urgent?** Not quite – how do we know when it is or why we need to buy now?
- **Useful?** Sort of – we know the names
- **Unambiguous?** Well, it might compel you to start reading
- It also came in at 52 characters, just under the 55-character recommended limit.

Source: http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/How_to_write_great_headlines_in_55_characters_or_f_46030.aspx#

Headline Writing

CAPE Announces Revolutionary New Tribute Bands Performing at SNHUstock!

- **Unique?** Maybe, but does it tell readers anything?
- **Urgent?** No
- **Useful?** Definitely not
- **Unambiguous?** Not at all
- This is a failed headline – too long, useless, and hype thanks to the exclamation point

Source: http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/How_to_write_great_headlines_in_55_characters_or_f_46030.aspx#

Headline Writing

“Ticket For Post Malone And Cardi B Tributes At SNHUstock March 30 Available Now”

- **Unique?** Yes.
- **Urgent?** Yup – we know it’s time to get tickets
- **Useful?** Unquestionably
- **Unambiguous?** Yup – time to read and buy
- **Character count:** 81 (a bit much)

Source: http://www.ragan.com/Main/Articles/How_to_write_great_headlines_in_55_characters_or_f_46030.aspx#

- [illegible]