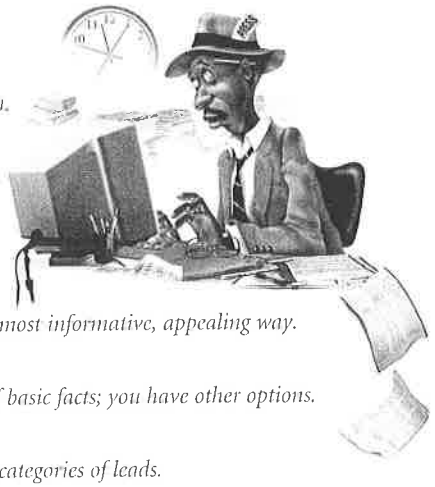
CHAPTER 3

Newswriting basics

Ready to write a simple news story? This chapter introduces you to the concepts and formulas all reporters have learned to rely upon.

IN THIS CHAPTER:

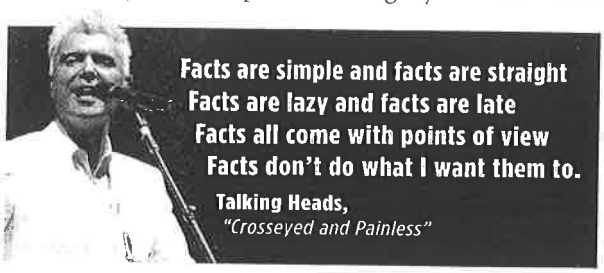


Just the facts

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 assembling your stories with the best facts you can find.

Good reporters respect the integrity of facts. When you select them carefully and present them properly, you can communicate without inserting your own opinion. For instance, this fact by itself may seem insignificant: *Only 24 percent of Americans can name two U.S. Supreme Court justices.*



But now consider this additional fact: *77 percent of Americans can name two of Snow White's seven dwarfs.*

Together, those two statistics may lead readers to conclude that Americans are uninformed and care more about cartoons than government. True? Arguably. But it demonstrates how journalism should work: The *facts* tell the story and let readers form their own opinions.

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:

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.

"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."

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.

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.

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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 Says who? Based on 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.

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 statistic is bogus and misleading.

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

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?

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

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

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.*)

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

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?

Ideally, journalism provides 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?

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

NO OPINION

An earthquake measuring 7.4 on the Richter scale shook western Japan on Sunday, forcing hundreds to evacuate as quake-generated tsunami waves approached. *(Reuters)*

This news story is straightforward, factual and unemotional — even though this event resulted in deaths and injuries. The reporter makes no attempt to overdramatize the situation or to philosophize about the human tragedy.

Battered by the recession and the deepest budget deficits in decades, a large majority of states are slicing into their social safety nets — often crippling preventive efforts that officials say would save money over time. *(The New York Times)*

In news analysis stories like this one, reporters must be careful not to inject their own political views. It's OK to use colorful verbs if they're accurate ("battered," "slicing," "crippling"), but opinions should be expressed only by people quoted in the story.

Tom Brady was uncannily accurate as usual, throwing for 335 yards and three touchdowns, but that wouldn't have been enough if not for two big plays by a defense that had been pushed around all night. *(The Associated Press)*

Sports stories often add flavor and attitude to the reporting. Like a play-by-play announcer, this reporter blends fact ("335 yards") with interpretation ("uncannily accurate as usual"). Sports fans — unlike readers of hard news — accept some colorful spin on their stories.

Goldman Sachs is everywhere, a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money. *(Matt Taibbi in Rolling Stone)*

Political commentary must be truthful, but it can be partisan and passionate, too, like this excerpt from a scathing analysis of Wall Street corruption. Attentive readers understand the difference between commentary and news.

"The Three Musketeers" is overblown, overdressed and grandiosely dopey, packed with gargantuan sets, ludicrous action scenes and shot in unusually dark and dingy 3-D. *(Chicago Reader)*

This movie review doesn't pull any punches. And that's what readers expect from critics, whether they're reviewing music, food, drama or video games. Reviewers, like columnists, are expected to mouth off in provocative ways.

STRONG OPINION

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:

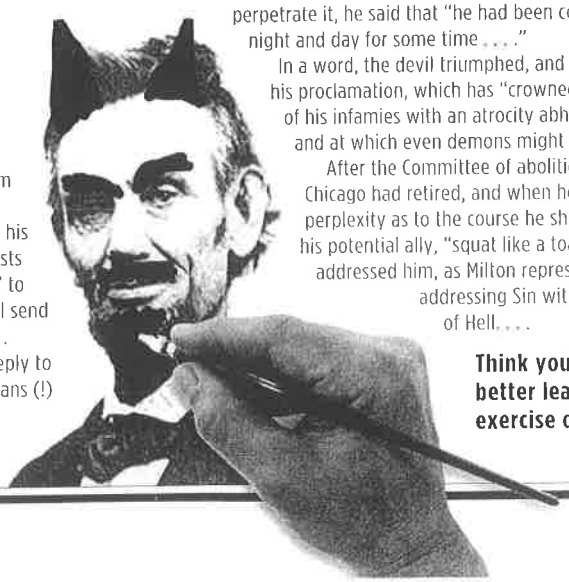
LINCOLN'S FIENDISH PROCLAMATION

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 66.

QUOTED

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

"Journalism is about transmitting information that doesn't care what you think. Reporting begins from the premise that there are things we need to know and understand, even if these things make us uncomfortable."
Chris Hedges, former foreign correspondent, *The New York Times*

"The problem is not that journalists can't get their facts straight: They can and usually do. The problem is that journalists have a difficult time distinguishing significant facts — facts with consequences — from insignificant ones."
Bret Stephens, *Wall Street Journal*

"At all times, we report for our readers and listeners, not our sources. So our primary consideration when presenting the news is that we are fair to the truth. If our sources try to mislead us or put a false spin on the information they give us, we tell our audience. If the balance of evidence in a matter of controversy weighs heavily on one side, we acknowledge it in our reports. We strive to give our audience confidence that all sides have been considered and represented fairly."
The NPR ethics handbook

FACT CHECK

THE 10 MOST COMMON FACTUAL NEWSPAPER ERRORS

Ranked in order of frequency, according to research at the University of Oregon:

1. Misquotation
2. Numbers wrong
3. Misspellling
4. Job title wrong
5. Name wrong
6. Location wrong
7. Time wrong
8. Date wrong
9. Address wrong
10. Age wrong

MORE ON WRITING COMMENTARY ▶ 134

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, signs were posted in the newsroom of Joseph Pulitzer's New York World that proclaimed:

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 dispute 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

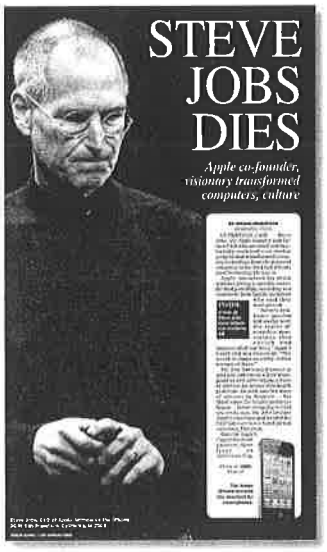
EXAMPLES OF THE FIVE W's *in a typical story, with facts color-coded to match the words in the headline at left:*

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.

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.**



THE WHO

No, we're not talking about that legendary 1960s rock band, 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 people: Celebrities. Movers and shakers. The rich and powerful. The weird and the 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 focus on 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 Scranton Times-Tribune focuses on the personality and legacy of Apple founder Steve Jobs — and the impact of his life on the world's technology and culture.*

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 WHAT

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 hear it at a news conference, uncover it on the police beat or watch it on a football field.

Now, here's a factor you may not have realized before: The "what" gives news its substance, while 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"). That's 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.

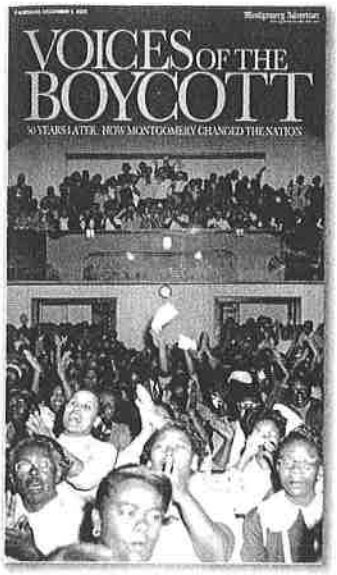
When it comes to big, no place does it better than the USA. But after a 34-year run, one of these icons is starting to see its popularity fade.

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." . . .



THE WHEN

Some news stories happened in the past (*The Beavers lost Friday night's game*). Some will happen in the future (*The Beavers play the Warthogs next week*). And some go on and on, through the past, present and future (*The Beavers are currently trapped in a 20-game losing streak. What will it take to make them winners again?*).

Timeliness is essential to every story. In this media-saturated, 24-hour cable-network-and-online-delivery culture we live in, your audience wants news that's fresh and immediate. They want to know *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 Southern life during 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. . . .

THE WHERE

The bigger the news organization, the broader its coverage area. USA Today, for example, calls itself "The Nation's Newspaper" and 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 story is crucial: the closer the event, the more relevant it will be to readers.

But explaining the "where" of a story isn't necessarily simple. The more complex a topic is, the more you may 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 shopping mall?*) 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 descriptions 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 clever "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. . . .

THE WHY

Good journalism reports the news; great journalism explains it. And explaining the news requires asking, over and over, the question "why": *Why is this new 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.*

THE HOW

Good reporters are also good teachers. They know how to explain things in a clear, concise way. And explaining the "how" of a story often requires detailed explanation: *How will the new budget 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 Florida Times-Union offers tongue-in-cheek tips on surviving a zombie attack.*

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 starting stories this way:

> GUANTANAMO 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 developed during the Civil War by correspondents like these from the New York Herald. Reporters transmitted their battlefield dispatches via telegraph, which was expensive and unreliable. Stories were often cut off in mid-sentence, before the reporter had gotten around to saying who'd won the battle. So frustrated editors began urging writers to file fact-filled summaries of their stories FIRST*, then add 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 readers quickly understand what's going on — without having to dig through a mile of text?

The solution: Summarize first. Explain later.

Anytime you write a story, you need 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 led to this *other* thing, 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 a slow and inefficient way to deliver breaking news. See for yourself:

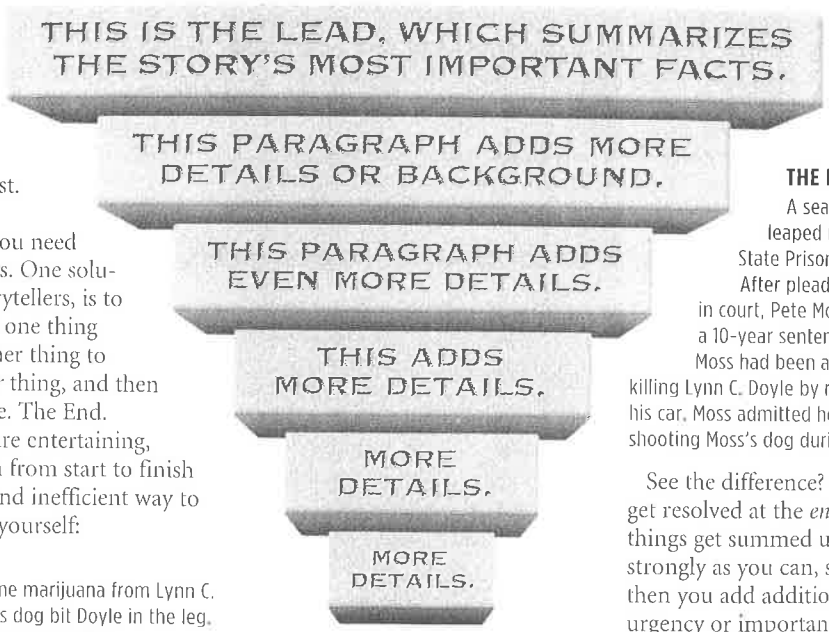
THE CHRONOLOGICAL STORY

On Sept. 20, Pete Moss bought some marijuana from Lynn C. Doyle. During the transaction, Moss's dog bit Doyle in the leg. 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 get resolved at the *end.* In the inverted pyramid, things get summed up at the *beginning.* You start as strongly as you can, summarizing what's newsiest — then you add additional facts in descending order of urgency or 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 third paragraph. Or the fourth. Or . . . .

The world's oldest dog has died in Sakura, Japan, at the age of 26 years and eight months — equal to 125 human years.

Pusuke, a fluffy tan Shiba mix, died Monday after suddenly falling ill and refusing to eat.

"I thank him for living so long with me," owner Yumiko Shinohara told reporters. "I felt as if he was my child."

The dog was born at the home of Shinohara's sister in March 1985 and was registered as a pet on April 1 that year.

In 2008, he suffered serious injuries after being hit by a car. A veterinarian told Shinohara it would be difficult to save Pusuke's life, but the dog underwent successful surgery.

Pusuke was recognized as the world's oldest living dog last December. The Guinness record for canine longevity is 29 years, set by Bluey, an Australian cattle dog who died in 1939.

This lead summarizes the three key W's of the story: the *who* (world's oldest dog), the *what* (death) and the *where* (Japan).

The second paragraph adds more descriptive details, while this third paragraph delivers an affectionate sound bite from the dog's owner.

Some extra documentation to validate the dog's age.

This paragraph recaps perhaps the most dramatic event in the dog's life, but it's really not *that* exciting — and not that essential.

This final paragraph provides more supplemental facts. This information is dispensable, though the "world's oldest dog" angle is what made this story newsworthy.

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 are some journalists so irked by 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 formulaic 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 arranges topics into accessible chunks to keep things interesting.)

Bottom line: The inverted pyramid is valuable for arranging 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 TRULY 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.

That's why it's *crucial* for you to realize how important your lead is. If you take too long to get to the point, your readers will flee like rats from a sinking ship.

Take the story at right, lifted from the front page of an Oregon newspaper. Try making sense of it by reading just the text. By the time the story jumps to page 7, you may be moaning, *What's the point?*

Fortunately for most readers, the headline tells you what the story's about long before the reporter does (which shows how important a good headline can be).

Now, some journalists argue that all good journalism is essentially storytelling — which is why we call them "news *stories*." Thus, we should write more narrative prose, like fiction writers do.

Unfortunately, it's also true that readers are impatient. They're in a hurry. They want the facts. *Now.* And the instant they feel you're wasting their time, they're gone.

Glib young con artist left string of victims, police say

Lucas Ebert, 21, is in jail accused of bilking dozens of people, family included, out of $100,000-plus

By JOSEPH ANDREWS

EBERT
Faces about 30 felony charges

Halley Weaver went from stopped on her bike at a downtown Portland intersection to splayed out on the hood of a yellow Porsche Boxster before the light ever turned green.

Her bike chain gouged her foot and the crash torqued her back. Her bike lay mangled in the street. The sports car had taken her out as it tried to make a right turn from the far left lane of Southwest Broadway onto Madison Street. Even if the car had made it onto Madison, it would have been going west up the eastbound street, the police report shows.

Weaver's first thought was to sit in front of the car to prevent it from peeling out and leaving the scene, but the man behind the wheel had no intention of driving away. He jumped out of the car and apologized profusely, Weaver said.

Her feeling changed from anger to pity when she saw the fresh-faced driver for the first time. He told Weaver he was distracted because his girlfriend had just broken up with

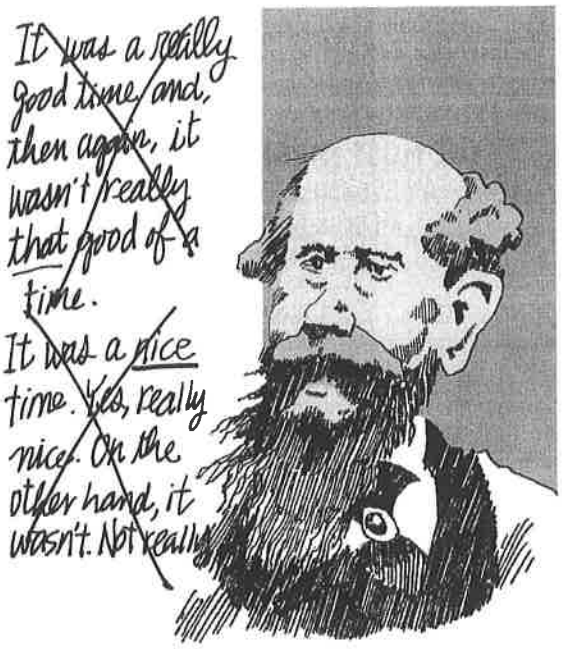
Please see **SCAMS,** Page A7

MORE ON STORY STRUCTURE ▶ 50

Writing basic news leads

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

Some journalism teachers insist that a story's lead (or "lede") must be *just one paragraph.* And that paragraph must use *just one sentence.* And that sentence must be *30 words or less.* And that violating these strict guidelines dooms your story to failure.



Fortunately — or unfortunately — it's not that simple. As we'll see in the pages ahead, you have many, many options for writing smart, engaging leads.

Let's begin by focusing on the most fundamental option: the basic news lead for inverted-pyramid stories. It's the style of newswriting that comes closest to using a dependable formula. And here's the good news: If you can master the process of writing leads — identifying key facts and expressing them concisely — you'll have a solid grasp of the craft of journalism.

Still, learning to write even the simplest leads takes time and practice. For many writers, just *starting* the story is the most agonizing, time-consuming part of the job. But that's why they pay reporters the big bucks. So start honing your speed and skill now.

UH-OH. HERE'S WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU "BURY THE LEAD"

Every so often, a surly editor may tell you to rework a story because you *buried the lead.* Which means, basically: You blew it. You thought *that thing* was the most important part of the story, but it's actually *this thing* — the news you buried down in the twelfth paragraph. So fix it, you knucklehead.

Here's a memorable example of a buried lead that actually ran in a New Jersey paper a half-century ago. The editors had recruited secretaries from local organizations to report on their groups' activities. But because these women weren't trained reporters, they didn't know how to write news stories — or more importantly, how to write news *leads.* So they ended up with this:

The Parent-Teacher Association of Cornelis Banta School held its regular monthly meeting Tuesday evening in the school cafeteria, for the election of officers for the coming year, with Mrs. Noah ten Floed, president, in the chair. The nominating committee proposed Mrs. Douwe Taleran for president, Mrs. David Demarest for vice president, and Mrs. Laurens van Boschkerken for secretary-treasurer. It was moved and seconded that the nominations be closed.

Mrs. Gianello Venutoleri arose and said that she wanted to nominate Mrs. Nuovo Cittadino, Mrs. Giuseppe Soffiate, and Mrs. Salvatore dal Vapore. Mrs. ten Floed ruled Mrs. Venutoleri out of order. Mrs. Venutoleri appealed to the parliamentarian, Miss Sarah Kierstad, who sustained the chair.

Mrs. Venutoleri took a small automatic pistol from her handbag and shot Mrs. ten Floed between the eyes. Constable Abraham Brinkerhoff came and escorted Mrs. Venutoleri to the county jail. The body of Mrs. ten Floed was removed to Van Emburgh's Funeral Parlor.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned for refreshments, which were served by Mrs. Adrian Blauvelt's committee. The next meeting will be held on Friday evening, Sept. 10, for the installation of officers.

HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE NEWS LEAD

1 COLLECT ALL YOUR FACTS

This is essential, for two reasons:

- If you don't know the whole story, your lead can't accurately summarize what's going on.
- The more you know about the story, the easier it will be for you to sum it up and boil it down.

2 SUM IT UP, BOIL IT DOWN

If you had just 10 seconds to shout this story over a cellphone with dying batteries, what would you say? If it helps you organize your thinking, jot down the five W's in a list, like so:

WHO: Three Mudflap passengers were injured.
WHAT: A private plane crashed.
WHEN: Friday night, 9:12 p.m.
WHERE: The Mudflap River behind Mudflap Airport.
WHY: A bolt of lightning struck the plane, killing the engine.

3 PRIORITIZE THE FIVE W's

The lead needs to contain the facts that are most important — and *only* those facts that are most important. So evaluate each of the five W's. Ask yourself: Which facts must be in the lead? Which can wait a paragraph or two? And which of the key facts deserves to start the first sentence?

4 RETHINK, REVISE, REWRITE

Write a first draft, even if it's not perfect, just to get things rolling. Then ask yourself:

Is it clear? Are the key points easy to grasp? Is the wording awkward in any way?
Is it active? Have you used a strong subject-verb-object sentence structure?
Is it concise? Does it bog down with unnecessary adjectives or phrases?
Is it compelling? Will it grab readers and keep them interested?

A PLANE CRASHES. WHICH LEADS ARE BEST (OR WORST)?

Writing leads is often a process of trial and error. You try stacking different facts in different ways until you find the most concise, effective combination.

Let's use that plane crash (from Tip #2 at left) as an example. You work for a weekly paper near the airport. What's the best lead for that news story? Here are some of the solutions you might create as you emphasize each of the five W's:

LEADING WITH THE WHO

In news stories about accidents or disasters, leads often begin by stating the number of deaths or injuries. It may seem morbid, but it helps readers gauge the seriousness of the event. So let's try that:

> Clark Barr, 45, Leah Tard, 42, and Eileen Dover, 17, of Hicksville, were injured when a bolt of lightning struck their private plane, a Cessna 812, at 9:12 p.m. Friday. Barr suffered a fractured leg, Tard cracked several of her ribs, and Dover, who remains in intensive care at Mudflap Hospital, broke both her wrists and ankles after nearly drowning in the river after the plane crashed.

Is this overkill? Yes. There's *way* too much detail too soon. Readers' eyes will glaze over as they try to digest all those facts. The lead should summarize, not itemize; even the names of the victims should wait a paragraph or two. One exception: a recognizable name can leap to the lead if that person is newsworthy —

> Hicksville mayor Clark Barr and two other passengers were injured Friday night when their private plane crashed into the river behind Mudflap Airport after being struck by lightning.

— but ordinarily, nonrecognizable names don't belong in the lead. Besides, that paragraph is still too wordy. Can it be trimmed even more? How about this:

> Three people were injured Friday when a plane crashed at Mudflap Airport.

It's shorter, yes. But now it's too short. There's just not enough information. It's vague. Dull. Undramatic. We need a few more details — but not *too* many — to tell the story and capture some of the drama:

> Three passengers were injured Friday when lightning struck their private plane, plunging them into the river behind Mudflap Airport.

Success! This lead gets the job done. It emphasizes the "who" (the three injured passengers) and conveys just enough of the key facts without being too wordy.

LEADING WITH THE WHAT

There are three "whats" in this story: the plane, the crash, the lightning. Which "what" is most leadworthy? Let's begin with an obvious but *bad* idea:

> There was an accident at Mudflap Airport Friday when a plane crashed after being struck by lightning, resulting in injuries to three passengers.

Dull? Yes. Why? Beginning a lead with a tired phrase like "there was" or "it is" makes the sentence weak and uninspired. It's almost like we're *backing into* the story. Better to use a more specific noun, like:

> A private plane crashed at Mudflap Airport Friday after being struck by lightning. Three passengers were injured.

Not bad. But "a private plane" isn't the most exciting phrase to start the lead with. (*"A hot-air balloon shaped like SpongeBob SquarePants"* — now, *there's* a phrase that would grab readers' attention.)

Notice, too, how that lead uses two sentences. That's acceptable. There's no rule that requires a lead to be only one sentence . . . BUT if you can construct one clear, compact sentence, do it. Let's try again:

> A private plane was struck by lightning and crashed at Mudflap Airport Friday, injuring three passengers.

This lead has a new problem. Know the difference between active and passive voice? **Active voice** uses strong subject-verb-object phrasing: *"lightning struck a plane."* **Passive voice** uses weaker phrasing: *"A plane was struck by lightning."* Good writers avoid the passive voice, especially in leads, because it lacks punch. Train yourself to recognize and avoid passive phrasing, which means rewriting the lead like this:

> A bolt of lightning struck a private plane as it landed at Mudflap Airport Friday, causing a crash that injured three passengers.

Good. We're using the strongest "what" to start the lead. We're using active voice. We're supplying enough of the key facts without getting too wordy.

LEADING WITH THE WHEN

The plane crashed on a Friday, but does that timing have any real significance? No. The "when" is not a crucial part of this story. (In fact, do we even have to specify it was Friday *night*?). Thus, this lead —

> On Friday night, three passengers were injured when their private plane crashed at Mudflap Airport after being struck by lightning.

— is a bit weak. Like that first "what" lead at left, it backs into the story, which often happens when you begin the lead with a prepositional phrase.

Now, suppose it had been a tragic week at Mudflap Airport. You *might*, in that case, call attention to that fact by crafting a "when" lead like this:

> For the third time this week, a private plane crashed at Mudflap Airport. On Friday, three passengers were injured after their plane was struck by lightning.

But that's not the case. So that's not our lead.

LEADING WITH THE WHERE

How important is the "where" of this story? Is it more significant than the crash or the injuries?

> At Mudflap Airport, three passengers were injured Friday when their private plane crashed into the river after being struck by lightning.

No. The "where" is crucial, but it's just not the juiciest fact. (Plus, we're assuming that Mudflap is nearby. If we lived farther away, we might also need to add more geographic detail, like what *state* Mudflap is in.)

LEADING WITH THE WHY

What caused this crash? Lightning hit the plane and killed the engine. Our story will go into greater detail, but a lead like this gives readers a quick grasp of what went wrong. So this "what" lead is also a good "why" lead.

SO WHICH LEAD IS BEST? Most reporters (and editors) would choose either that final "who" lead or that final "what" lead. Both are effective. Which do you prefer?

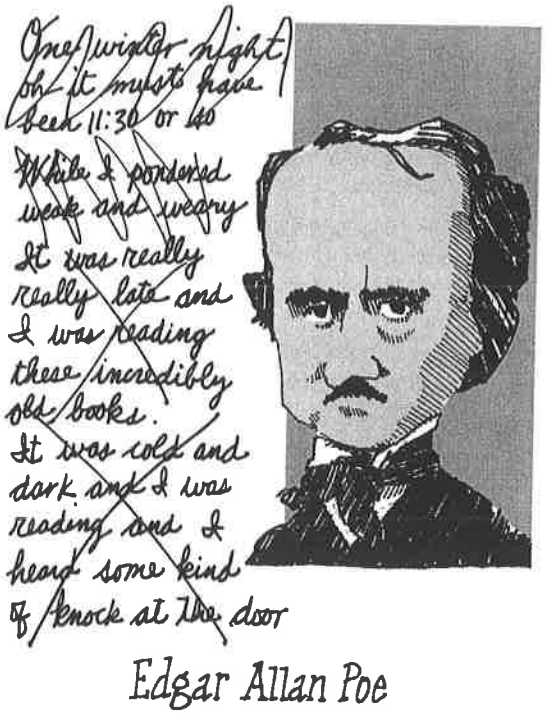
READY TO TRY WRITING SOME LEADS? TEST YOURSELF ▶64

Beyond the basic news lead

It's not mandatory that you begin every story with a summary of key facts.

As we've explained, for most breaking news events, you need leads that are factual and concise. You need leads that summarize the *who-what-when-where-why*. And being able to produce 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 examine political 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 instead lead with this:

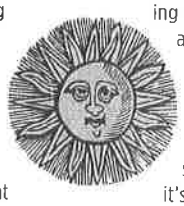
Lincoln Mabry Jr. so loved Becky Kerr that he beat her in the face with a pistol barrel and shot her to death.

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 daydreaming 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.



. . . AND ONE OF THE SHORTEST LEADS EVER WRITTEN

James Thurber was a popular humorist and cartoonist in the mid-20th century. He started out as a newspaper reporter, and when his editor urged him to write short, dramatic leads, Thurber responded by beginning a murder story this way:

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.

"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 tagline."

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'S THE RIGHT LEAD TO WRITE?

The city council met Tuesday to consider installing parking meters on Boinck Street, a road bordering 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," the mayor insisted, 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? Let's explore your 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 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, when students will start paying 50 cents an hour to park on Boinck Street.

Clever? Or cliché? That lead has a little attitude . . . but too much? And should it say "students will start paying" — or "*you* will start paying"? If it's more dramatic to aim 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 '93 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.) 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, so students will start feeding meters Jan. 1.

These quotes are strong, but those student names are a bit distracting (besides, the story isn't 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) may feel this lead is unfairly biased. 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 weakest leads are those that are vague and wordy. Remember, most leads are usually 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 can undermine 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.*

- **Avoid naming 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 perspective as often as possible. Don't just report — *explain.* Emphasizing why things matter often makes the best lead.

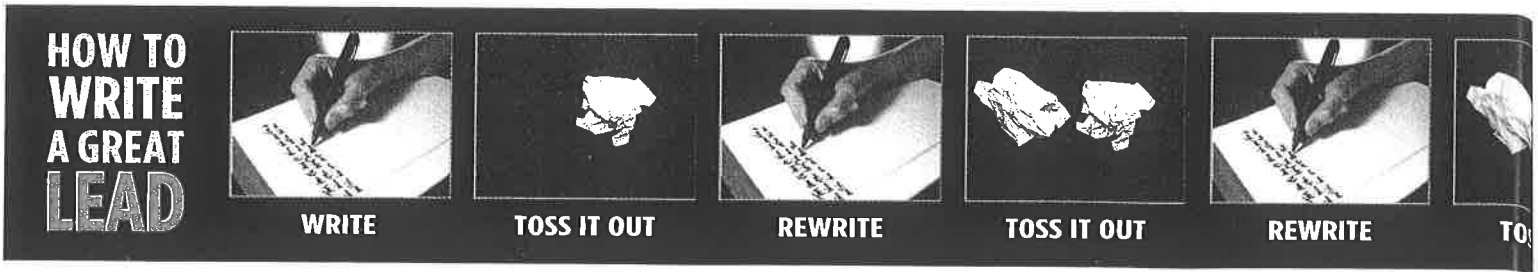
- **Sell the story.** Find out what makes *this* story different or special, and use that to punch up the lead. Who wants to read another ordinary meeting/game/speech story?

- **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 to 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.* ▼

WANT TO TRY WRITING SOME LEADS? TEST YOURSELF ▶ 64

MORE ON ATTRIBUTIONS ▶ 84, 185



Leads that succeed

A roundup of the most popular, commonly used options.

Writing is a creative process, so there's no way to list every conceivable category of lead. (Many have tried. All have failed.) Instead, this collection of favorites is just a beginning. 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 clever 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:

> Two students suffered minor burns Friday at Mudflap High School after the remains of a science experiment burst into flames in a chemistry lab garbage can.

◆ ***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 over 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 or 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 that points us toward 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 "The Simpsons" 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*

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.

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

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

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 GENERALLY AVOID

◆ ***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: *Something happened. Or maybe not. We're not sure.*

◆ ***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 engaging 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 may not fairly summarize the story. It's an opinion, not a fact. And we don't really know (or care) who this Anne Chovey is, anyway.

Her quote might work better in the second paragraph — following a newsier lead.

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

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

You need to outline your story. To do that, first review your notes. Organize your material into sections, then try arranging those sections in different orders to see what's most logical.

For instance, suppose a college is debating whether to outlaw dogs on the school grounds. Here are 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 Ⓐ, Ⓑ, Ⓒ, Ⓓ, etc. In the second story, notice how we've repositioned 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.

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

Ⓑ 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.

Ⓒ 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.

Ⓔ "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."

Ⓕ 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."

Ⓖ 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."

Ⓗ 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.

Ⓘ 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?

SIMS QUOTE #2
This lead starts the story with a more human angle.

THE NUT GRAF

SIMS QUOTE #1
Now we get the joke: Romeo is... a dog! This is a *blind lead* — where readers have to wait a paragraph or two 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 this biased?

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. ▼

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."

HOW WOULD YOU WRITE THIS STORY FOR BROADCAST? ▶ 192

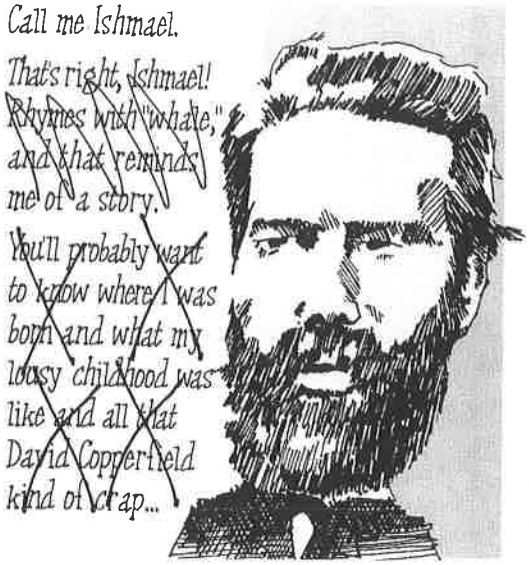
THIS STORY STRUCTURE IS SHAPED LIKE A KABOB ▶ 50

After the lead...what next?

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

As a writer, you'll spend lots of time and energy crafting your leads. Which is good, especially when it forces you to evaluate your reporting 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 key 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 prizewinning 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

The best way to get the hang of writing news stories is to start small, with *briefs.* A brief is any news story that's — well, *brief.* Some briefs are just a paragraph long (like the smartly crafted news summaries on the front page of The Wall Street Journal). 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. Those are 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 through 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 FOLLOW-UP 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 may quickly ask, *Where's this story going?* 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 grafs 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.

Adam Neve, 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.

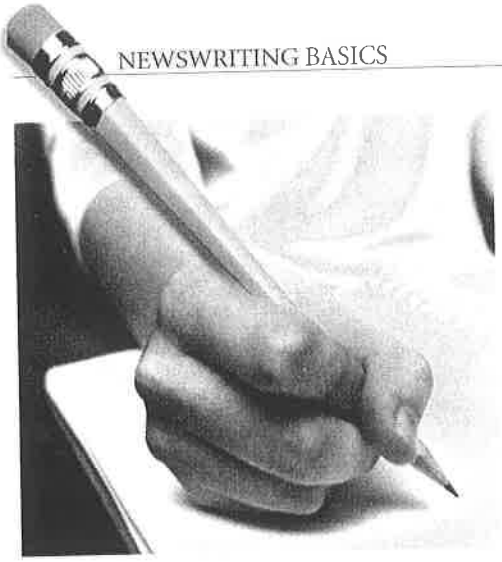
Repair crews worked for more than 72 hours after Monday night's ice storm downed dozens of power lines.

Or to add a supporting quote:

It's official: Ike Arumba, the Stars' star shortstop, is out for the season.

"My doctor said he's never seen a wrist as badly shattered as mine," said Arumba, who was hit by a pitch in Saturday's game against Lincoln.

EXERCISES IN WRITING BRIEFS AND BRITES ▶65, 66



Story structure

Giving an overall shape to your writing.

Let's be clear: There's no simple, droolproof, one-size-fits-all solution for organizing news material. Most stories will unfold in different ways.

Still, there's nothing random about good writing. Every story needs a beginning, middle and end. You can't just toss facts together into a news salad and expect readers to swallow it. If you want them to digest what you're saying, you need to organize each story's overall structure. Here are some recipes.

ORGANIZING YOUR STORY: THE MOST COMMON SHAPES

You may think newswriting is a free-style, seat-of-the-pants, spur-of-the-moment, sit-down-and-bang-it-out kind of thing.

Wrong. Write that way and your stories will be rambling jumbles of random facts and quotes.

Readers hate chaos. Confuse them and you lose them.

So think before you write. Organize your ideas. Plan your story, whether by sketching a quick outline, visualizing a mental image or brainstorming with an editor — whatever helps you create a road map for your story to follow.

If you get stuck, try carving your story's structure into broad sections, such as —

I. The Problem
II. How It Got This Way
III. Where We Go From Here

— or maybe something like this:

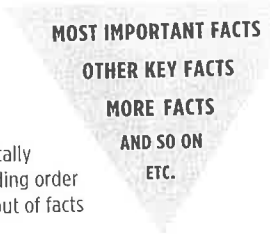
I. Look: This Person Has a Problem
II. Uh-oh. The Problem Is Everywhere
III. What the Experts Say
IV. What the Future Holds
V. What It All Means for That Person We Met at the Start of the Story

That structure, it turns out, is quite popular with journalists, especially feature writers at the Wall Street Journal. To save time and effort, crafty reporters automatically pour their stories into that tried-and-true shape (just like they pour breaking news into inverted pyramids).

Yes, we know: Every story is unique. Still, if it helps you structure material by visualizing physical shapes like pyramids, circles or martini glasses, consider the options at right.

THE INVERTED PYRAMID

Best for: News briefs, stories about breaking news events.
Not recommended for: Anything else.
How it works: Summarize the key facts in a concise lead. Then organize the story as logically as possible, arranging paragraphs in descending order of importance. End the story when you run out of facts (or you run out of room).



THE MARTINI GLASS

Also known as: The Hourglass.
Best for: Crimes, disasters or other dramatic news stories where you want to include a chronology that tracks how events unfolded.
How it works: Begin with an inverted-pyramid summary of the story's most important facts. Once that's done, shift into a chronological narrative. (Try setting it up with a phrase such as *Police gave this account of the accident:)*. Then recount what happened, step by step. If possible, end with a kicker (a surprise twist or strong closing quote).
Example: See "Check-writer sets off clerk's internal alarm" in the Morgue, page 241.

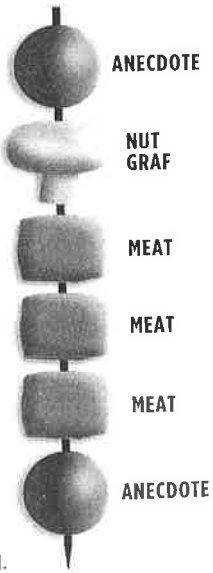
THE KABOB

Also known as: The Wall Street Journal formula or the Circle.
Best for: Stories on trends or events where you want to show how *actual people* are affected or involved.
How it works: The story begins with a quote or anecdote about a *specific person*. Then it broadens into a *general discussion* of the topic. It ends by returning to that *specific person* again.

Think of it as arranging meat and veggies on a shish kabob skewer: Start with a juicy tomato (an anecdote). Follow that with a nut graf. Then add meat — chunk after chunk after chunk — until you reach the end, where you reprise with another tomato (a final quote or anecdote).

The Wall Street Journal is well known for crafting stories this way. Some also view it as a circle, like the one at left. Whatever.

Example: See "For those cut off, a life primeval," page 231.



AND AS YOU MOVE FROM PARAGRAPH TO PARAGRAPH, REMEMBER:

◆ ***Keep paragraphs short.*** Short, punchy paragraphs are *much* easier for readers to scan and absorb.

Really.

Some reporters have even trained themselves to write just one sentence per paragraph.

Like this.

Think of it this way: In a narrow column of text, deep paragraphs (like the one you're reading now) get dense and daunting. As long, wordy sentences stack up, your eyes seek a place to rest. Thus, thick paragraphs may actually discourage readers from sticking with your story. So you should also try to:

◆ ***Write one idea per paragraph.*** Keep your focus tight, especially when explaining complex material. Parcel out your information in short, paragraph-sized chunks. Think about hitting the return key every time you type a period.

◆ ***Add transitions.*** To keep your story flowing, guide the reader from one idea to another with carefully placed *transitions* — words or phrases such as:

However,	Meanwhile,
In addition,	Previously,
Finally,	On a related issue,

In this example, notice how transitions (in italics) help connect the ideas from sentence to sentence:

> Police will cast a watchful eye on downtown revelers this New Year's Eve.
>
> *But* police admitted they will not be as prepared for trouble as they had hoped. *For one thing,* backups from the state highway patrol will probably not be available.
>
> *Instead,* Police Chief David Barker said he will rely on reservists to augment the city's regular officers.

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO TO KEEP READERS FROM GETTING BORED?

See those two guys there? See how they're reading their newspaper with excited grins on their faces? Well, nobody does that anymore. Sorry.

Nowadays, readers are in a hurry. They're impatient. They're easily bored. Your job is to deliver information to them in the most appealing, accessible, easy-to-digest way. In fact, we could argue that the modern journalist's job basically boils down to:

1) ***teaching,*** and
2) ***storytelling.***

Which means that anytime you have a wonderful narrative story to tell, by all means *tell it.* Work your magic. Paint a picture. Make us laugh. Make us cry.

But how often will you find those wonderful narrative stories? Sad to say, they're awfully rare. Which means that most of the time your job will be teaching readers about complex issues and events. You'll have to *think* like a teacher; you'll have to constantly ask: What's the most effective way to convey this information?

For today's readers, gray pages packed with paragraph after paragraph of long-winded narrative text simply *isn't* the most effective way to communicate anymore.

Later on, we'll explore this topic further.▼ But for now, before you unleash any mile-long narratives, consider these alternatives:

ALTERNATIVES TO LONG, GRAY NEWS STORIES

BULLETS

One effective way to highlight a series of items is to add bullets, which emphasize key points so they "pop" out of the text. For best results:

- **Start with a boldface phrase,** like this, to make your main points easy to scan.
- **Use parallel construction.** Here, for example, every bullet item is a handy tip, and each phrase begins with a verb.
- **Run at least three items.** Fewer than that and lists look odd or incomplete.

Throughout this book, we use bullets (with boldface type and diamond-shaped dingbats) to summarize tips and lists. But bullets work well in news stories, too.

SIDEBARS

A sidebar is any short feature written to accompany a longer story. Sidebars usually run in boxes beside or beneath the main story, like the one you're reading now. They help you reorganize complex information into smaller sections, to which you can add graphics, photos, etc.

As it turns out, sidebars often have higher readership than the stories they accompany simply because they're shorter and easier to access.

SUBHEADS

These are boldface, underlined and blue (but they work in plain black, too). Notice how they visually divide the text in this sidebar into four smaller sections.

Subheads break long stories into short, accessible chunks. You can add them anytime there's a shift in topics — which means that if you want to make complex material more reader-friendly, you can build subheads into your story as you write it. Like we've done here.

OTHER SHORT-FORM OPTIONS

Not every story requires paragraph after paragraph after paragraph of text. Take this book, for example. Have you noticed how there's virtually no long-winded text anywhere in this thing?

You be the judge: Has this format made the information easier for you to absorb? Or has it just dumbed things down?

You can craft news stories the same way we've structured this book. You can break complex material into lists. Quizzes. Q and A's. Timelines. Chronologies. First-person flashbacks. Diagrams.

In Chapter 6, we'll show in more detail how these alternatives work.▼

THE ENDING. THE CLOSER. THE KICKER. THE BIG FINISH.

Good writers agonize over endings just like they agonize over leads. They often save their best stuff for last: a juicy quote. A clever pun. A revealing anecdote. An amazing fact.

The goal is to give the story a climax, a punch line — what writers call a *kicker.*

"You should hear it echoing in your head when you put the paper down," says Bruce DeSilva of The Associated Press. "It should stay with you and make you think a little bit."

SAM STANTON *of the Sacramento Bee concluded his story about the execution of a murderer this way:*

A guard read the wordy announcement that contained a simple message:

Robert Alton Harris had been declared legally dead at 6:21 p.m.

The witnesses filed outside, into the bright sunlight.

After 25 years and nine days, California's gas chamber was back in operation.

DON HAMILTON *covered the dedication ceremony at a Vietnam War memorial. His story ended:*

Toward the end of the ceremony, Lee Ripley looked down and shook his head. Ripley served in the Air Force in 1968 and 1969.

"I hope we don't have to do this again anytime in the future," he said quietly. "But I bet they said that after Gettysburg. We still haven't learned anything."▼

ERIN BARNETT *wrote about a woman caring for her failing husband, an Alzheimer's victim:*

She pulls a turtleneck over John's wiry gray hair. Then she brushes his teeth and his wet hair before pulling him up. He looks down at her. She looks up at him.

"There you go sweetie," she says.

And John is off. He strides back through the bedroom. He passes a watercolor of maroon, yellow and brown on the wall. Nellie says it is nasturtiums climbing out of their planter box. Like all her paintings, this one has a name. She calls it "Breaking Free."

RICK BELLA *begins his story about a seaside sand-castle contest with a biblical reference:*

In the beginning, there was mud.

The story concludes this way:

Finally, as the crowd retreated, the Pacific lapped at the creations, reclaiming the sand to re-create the familiar beach.

Ashes to ashes, mud to mud.

CHECKLIST

- **Plan ahead.** Don't just end a story because you ran out of material. Write the ending right after you write the lead, then fill in the middle. Think of the lead and the ending as bookends.
- **Don't end stories by summarizing** what we've learned, like term papers do. There's no need to revisit or rehash points you've previously made. We don't need any sermonettes, either.
- **Avoid cute clichés** like *That's all, folks,* or *And that's the way it is.*
- **End with a bang** (a strong word or phrase), not a whimper (a weak attribution like "he said"). Effective writers try to place their most emphatic words **here, at the end.**

"CHUNKING" STORIES FOR ONLINE READERS ▶ 169 READ THIS ENTIRE STORY ▶ 216 MORE ON SHORT-FORM ALTERNATIVES ▶ 132

Rewriting

Your story's good. Now make it better.

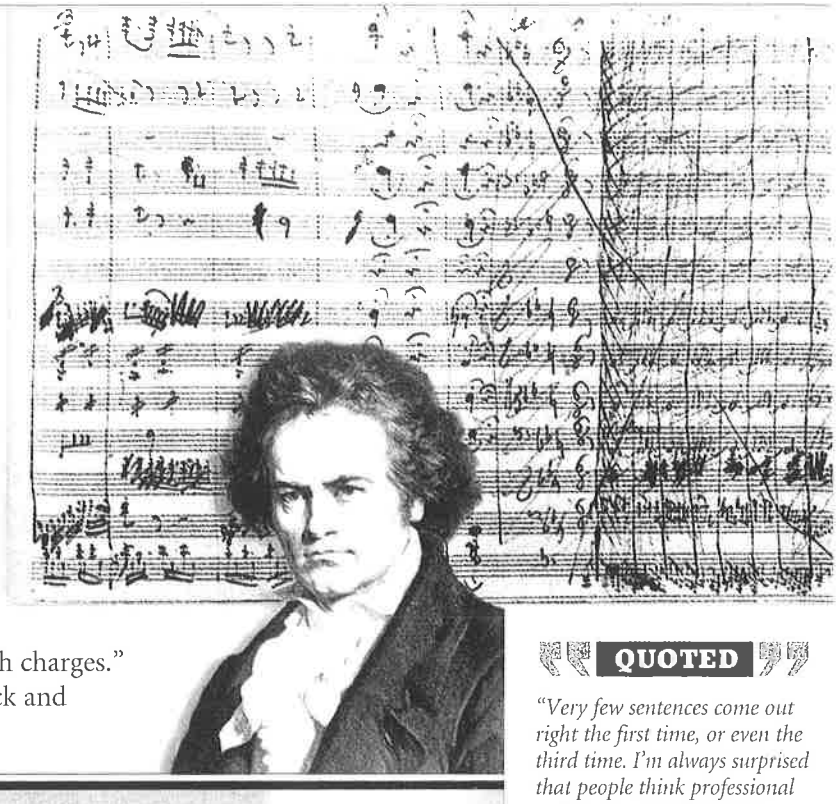
Observe, at right, Ludwig van Beethoven struggling to write one of his orchestral works. Notice how the brilliant composer wrote and rewrote and rewrote note after note after note. And even after he *died,* Beethoven kept on decomposing.

Ba-da-*boom.*

Hey, but seriously... any veteran journalist will tell you that writing, as the adage goes, is *rewriting.* Few stories arrive fully formed and perfectly phrased; most require rethinking, restructuring, rewording and a lot of other *"re"* words.

"There's no rule on how to write," Hemingway once said. "Sometimes it comes easily and perfectly. Sometimes it is like drilling rock and blasting it out with charges."

We could explain further, but first we need to go back and rework that Beethoven joke.



BEFORE & AFTER: A REPORTER'S EARLY DRAFT AND FINAL STORY

Stories don't always start out *bad.* They don't always end up *good.* But the goal of rewriting is to make things a little better, then a little better, then a little better.... until you hit the SEND button and move on.

Take the story below, part of a Labor Day package on people with odd jobs. Compare the before-and-after changes that make it more readable:

BEFORE

Linda Marvin is a cheese whiz.

For the past four years, Marvin has been a cheese grading analyst for the Tillamook County Creamery Association, and as such, she is responsible for inspecting and monitoring the quality of Tillamook cheese.

As quietly as a mouse, she cuts the cheese, chews it, smells it and rubs her fingers in it.

Marvin carefully inspects the color, texture, odor and flavor of the cheese, which other cheese makers don't do. That lowers their quality, she says, which hurts the industry overall.

"I'm very proud of my work," she says. "People say, 'I don't know if I could chew cheese every day.' But luckily, I love cheese. I really do. And I really don't mind doing this."

So with all this constant cheese-chewing, has Marvin put on a lot of weight?

"I spit it out," she says, "so I haven't gained any weight."

No, no, no. This lead is too cutesy.

Sentence is long and dull, with weak verbs, clunky phrasing *("as such")* and redundancy *(grading, inspecting, monitoring).* Very slow going.

Such a weak cliché. And *"cuts the cheese"*? Please. Are we trying to embarrass this woman?

"Carefully inspects" seems redundant. (Can you *carelessly* inspect something?)

The word *"which"* is used the same way in two consecutive sentences.

A nice quote, but it rambles on for too long.

That phrase *"put on a lot of weight"* sounds harsh and insensitive.

AFTER

Linda Marvin's nose knows cheese.

As cheese grading analyst for the Tillamook County Creamery Association, she spends each day smelling and squeezing chunks of Tillamook cheese.

She chooses some cheese, then chews it. Sniffs it. Snaps off a slab. Rubs her fingers in it.

Marvin gives that cheese a complete physical checkup — color, texture, odor, flavor — something lesser cheese makers don't bother doing. Which cheeses her off.

"I'm very proud of my work," she explains. "People say, 'I don't know if I could chew cheese every day.' But luckily, I love cheese."

After four years of cheese-chewing, has Marvin packed on a few extra pounds?

"I spit it out," she says with a laugh, "so I haven't gained any weight."

This lead is better (or, at least, it's fun to read aloud).

This paragraph is now tighter and punchier. Verbs are stronger and more colorful.

Another sentence that's fun to say aloud. These short sentence fragments speed the read.

A change in wording.

Another sentence fragment. And an attempt at humor.

Those last two extraneous sentences have been removed from this quote.

The reference to *"four years"* has moved here, from the second paragraph. *"A few extra pounds"* is kinder and gentler.

QUOTED

"Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. I'm always surprised that people think professional writers get everything right on the first try. Just the opposite is true; nobody rewrites more often than the true professional. I rewrite everything at least five or six times."

William Zinsser, author of *On Writing Well*

"I hate to write; I like to revise. And the amount of revision I do is terrific. I like to get the first draft out of my system. That's the hardest thing for me."

Malcolm Cowley, reporter and novelist

"It is perfectly OK to write garbage — as long as you edit brilliantly. In other words, until you have something down on paper (even if it's terrible) there is nothing you can improve. The audience neither needs nor gets to see the less-than-brilliant first draft, so they won't know you weren't brilliant all along."

C.J. Cherryh, science fiction author

"Someone said a work of art is never finished, it's always abandoned. I will rewrite until they literally seize it from my hand and say stop."

Sally Quinn, columnist

"There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein."

Red Smith, sports columnist

1 PASSIVE VERBS

There is a problem many reporters struggle with. The sentences that are written by them are passive. Their phrasing is made awkward because of this, and — *wait! Stop!!*

We desperately need to rewrite that paragraph to make it less *passive.* Like this, instead:

Many reporters struggle because they write passive sentences. This makes their phrasing awkward.

See the difference? We've strengthened our syntax by starting sentences with their subjects. We've eliminated that clunky phrase *there is.* And we've replaced the verb *to be* (words such as *is* and *are*) with stronger verbs.

You don't have to be a grammar geek to see our point here. Make your sentences *emphatic.* Avoid weak, flabby verbs. No — don't just avoid them: *Zap* them. *Whack* them. *Nuke* them. *Gun them down* and *snuff them out.*

2 REDUNDANCY . . . AND REPEATING YOURSELF

Sorry. Obviously, we got carried away there at the end of Tip #1.

But sometimes we don't realize that we're using unnecessary words and phrases. Why say that someone is *currently* president of the club? Or that the game is *scheduled for* Friday night? Or that the victims were burned *in the flames?*

Those italicized words add bulk but no extra meaning, just like these doublespeak phrases:

grateful thanks	true facts	personal opinion
all-time record	end result	serious danger
totally destroyed	very unique	first time ever

Be on the lookout for unnecessary modifiers that *sound* logical but add nothing. Eliminate waste. Edit yourself ruthlessly. As Mark Twain once advised: "When in doubt, strike it out."

3 LONG, LONG, LONG WORDY SENTENCES

It should be pointed out that many writers, in order to make themselves sound much more profound and scholarly than indeed they actually are, use flabby, inflated wording such as "it should be pointed out" and "in order to" and "indeed" — which we just did ourselves, in fact, earlier in this sentence — in addition to piling up clauses (some using dashes such as those a few words back) or parentheses, such as those in the line above, not to mention semicolons, which often suggest that the writer *wants* to end the sentence, but just can't bring himself to actually type a period; nonetheless, today's busy readers are too impatient to tolerate the sort of 18th-century pomposity wherein writers, so in love with the sound of their own voices, just go on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on and on

4 JARGON AND JOURNALESE

Bureaucrats love to use words like *utilize, finalize* and *structured.* Cops like to say suspects are *apprehended* and *incarcerated.* And if you're a campus spokesperson, why say *"the school can't afford the pay raises"* when you could say *"the salary scale revision will adversely affect the university's financial stability"*?

Good reporters relentlessly filter out bloated, convoluted jargon and officialese. And those who don't should be *redirected, transitioned, involuntarily separated,* or possibly *subject to personnel surplus reduction* — i.e., fired.

But reporters often lapse into "journalese" without realizing it. Journalese, as veteran editor Joe Grimm puts it, is the peculiar language that newspapers have evolved that reads like this:

> Negotiators yesterday, in an eleventh-hour decision following marathon talks, hammered out agreement on a key wage provision they earlier had rejected.

That's not as bad as bureaucratic gobbledygook. But it's still a problem because it's full of:

5 CLICHÉS

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, you should work 24/7 to avoid clichés like the plague. Hel-*lo?* It's a no-brainer. Go ahead . . . make my day.

Tired clichés instantly lower the IQ of your writing. So do corny newswriting clichés (a form of journalese) like these:

> The close-knit community was shaken by the tragedy.
> Tempers flared over a laundry list of complaints.
> The embattled mayor is cautiously optimistic, but troubled youths face an uncertain future sparked by massive blasts in bullet-riddled, shark-infested waters.
> So now begins the heartbreaking task of cleaning up.

Yes, clichés *do* sometimes come in handy. And yes, a skilled writer *can* use them in clever ways.

Once in a blue moon. ▼

THE FOG INDEX

Is your writing murky? Dense? Wordy and complex?

Test it and see. The Fog Index, developed by Robert Gunning 50 years ago, measures the readability of your prose. It assumes that the longer your sentences are, and the bigger the words you use, the tougher your stuff is to read.

Here's how to calculate your Fog Index:

1) Find a typical sample of your writing, one that uses around 100 words.
2) Calculate the average number of words you use per sentence.
3) Now count the total number of "hard" words you use — those with three syllables or more (not counting proper names).
4) Add those two figures together.
   Example: If you average *12* words per sentence and use *10* big words, *12 + 10 = 22.*
5) Multiply that sum by 0.4.

The resulting number is your Fog Index: the number of years of schooling a reader needs to understand what you've written.

Since most Americans read at about a 9th-grade level, experts advise aiming for a Fog Index of 7 or 8, just to be safe. The Bible, Mark Twain and TV Guide have Fog Indexes of about 6. (So does this Fog Index story.) Gassy academic papers and foggy government reports score in the — ugh — twenties.

Consider this example:

"The developments in the reconstruction project come after revelations that an extensive effort by the Goode Administration to repair damages at 82 houses near the destroyed homes has been plagued by shoddy workmanship, double-billing by contractors, inadequate management controls and ongoing disputes over how much damage was caused by the May 13 siege in which a police bomb ignited a blaze that killed 11 people."

That paragraph has a Fog Index of 30. Now consider this from Winston Churchill:

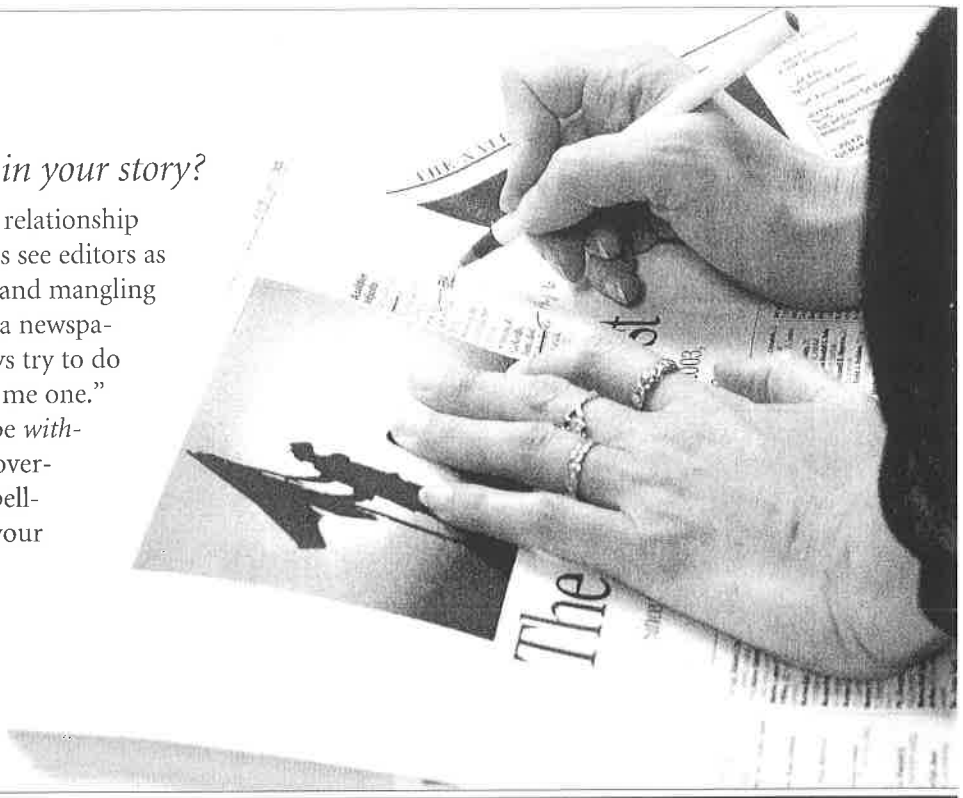
"We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France. We shall fight in the seas and oceans. We shall fight on the beaches, in the fields, in the streets, and in the hills. We shall never surrender."

Like it? It has a Fog Index of 3.4.

AN AMUSING LIST OF JOURNALISTIC CLICHES ▶ 299

Editing

Who's going to clean up the errors in your story?



For centuries, reporters have had a love-hate relationship with their editors. On the one hand, reporters see editors as "the boss" — barking orders, spiking stories and mangling their exquisite prose. "I am not the editor of a newspaper," Mark Twain once said, "and shall always try to do right and be good so that God will not make me one."

But on the other hand, where would you be *without* editors? Who would organize the news coverage? Pacify angry readers? Fix your clumsy spelling? Delete that innocent-looking phrase in your story that could get you sued?

Every story needs editing, and every newsroom needs good editors. Copy editors, photo editors, design editors, online editors — they all play a part in making your efforts as effective as they can be.

HOW EDITORS PLAY A PART IN THE STORIES YOU PRODUCE

Every story you write will be reviewed by an editor prior to being published (in print publications, anyway. On the Web, writers often post news bulletins and blog entries before running them by an editor).

At small publications, one editor may write, proofread and design every page — while at big newspapers, you might find an "assistant night sports editor" who never writes a word and relies on a dozen other editors to process the reporters' finished stories.

Generally, though, here's what editors do:

Don Colburn, a reporter covering health issues at The Oregonian, discusses a story idea with his editor, Sally Cheriel.

BEFORE YOU WRITE THE STORY

- **Assigning the story.** Editors try to match the story to the right reporter, weighing factors such as workload, writing style, prior experience, etc.
- **Planning the angle.** Editors will steer you to focus on a particular aspect of the story: *"Let's examine how this new law affects part-time students."*
- **Estimating the scope.** How long should each story be? Editors will often decide *("just give me 10 inches")* based on a story's impact, the amount of news traffic that day, or how much space or time is available.
- **Anticipating the packaging.** Some stories are simple: just text and a headline. Others require photos, sidebars, charts or graphs — and the best time to plan a complex package is before you start writing. ▼

As deadline approaches, Cheriel works with Colburn on the final draft of his story, making comments and suggesting changes.

WHILE YOU WRITE THE STORY

- **Adding new details.** Editors will notify you of new developments *("the mayor just got arrested")* that force you to revise your story.
- **Monitoring your speed.** *"When's that tax story gonna be done?"* With many stories in progress, editors always keep one eye on the clock, guiding the staff's work flow as deadline approaches.
- **Fine-tuning your approach.** Before you veer in the wrong direction, editors try to ensure your story answers the right questions. ("The lead isn't that *they lost the game,* it's that *the quarterback broke his leg.*")
- **Monitoring layout changes.** If a new ad comes in, your 20-inch story may suddenly get cut in half. Or the story may hold for a day, waiting for a late photo.

Copy editor Kay Mitchell follows behind The Oregonian's reporters and editors, making last-minute corrections and writing headlines.

AFTER YOU WRITE THE STORY

- **Editing the content.** Several editors may examine the structure and substance of your story to ensure it's readable, logical and fair.
- **Copy editing.** This is where any errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation or style get fixed. When that's done, a copy editor writes a headline that summarizes and sells the story to readers.
- **Cutting or padding to fit.** Once all the photos, ads and stories combine on the page, some elements may need to grow or shrink. On deadline, the easiest solution may be to cut the bottom off your story.
- **Assigning follow-up stories.** Often, one event *("the mayor resigns")* flows into another *("meet the new mayor")* — and the whole process begins again.

MORE ON **PACKAGE PLANNING** ▶130

HOW MUCH EDITING DO YOU NEED?

How's your spelling? Grammar? Punctuation? Know much about style, usage or libel? Take this test and see if you're ready to write a printable story.

Answers on page 312.

5 *Which would you print?*

__ **a)** Police arrested the rapist, Levon Coates, who sheriff Smith described as a homeless drug addict.

__ **b)** Police arrested the alleged rapist, Levon Coates, whom Sheriff Smith described as a homeless drug addict.

__ **c)** Neither of the above.

6 *Which would you print?*

__ **a)** The $4,400,000 grant is allocated into three areas: $1,700,000 for research, $1,900,000 for new oscilators, and $1,800,000 for salaries.

__ **b)** The $4.4 million grant is allocated into three areas: $1.7 million for research, $1.9 million for new oscillators and $1.8 million for salaries.

__ **c)** Neither of the above.

7 *Which would you print?*

__ **a)** The terrorist will be hanged at midnight.

__ **b)** The condemned terrorist will be hung at 12 midnight.

8 *Which would you print?*

__ **a)** By the time Lincoln became President, seven states had succeeded from the union: South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Georgia.

__ **b)** By the time Lincoln became president, seven states had seceded from the Union: South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Georgia.

__ **c)** Neither of the above.

9 *Which would you print?*

__ **a)** Melman is the candidate that is very heavily favored.

__ **b)** Melman is the heavily-favored candidate.

__ **c)** Neither of the above.

10 *Which is correct?*

__ **a)** Between you and me, she is a better reporter than I.

__ **b)** Between you and I, she is a better reporter than me.

11 *Which would you print?*

__ **a)** Jim and his friend, Jack, were chased by his dalmatian puppy, Rex, which bit him.

__ **b)** Jim and his friend Jack were chased by his Dalmatian puppy Rex, who bit him.

__ **c)** Neither of the above.

12 *Which would you print?*

__ **a)** The boys' golf team won their first play-off.

__ **b)** The boys golf team won its first playoff.

13 *Which would you print?*

__ **a)** 20,000 helpless villagers died in the tragic volcano eruption.

__ **b)** Twenty thousand helpless villagers died tragically in the volcano eruption.

__ **c)** The volcano killed 20,000 helpless villagers.

__ **d)** None of the above.

14 *Which would you print?*

__ **a)** More than 50 anti-war churchgoers carried handmade signs.

__ **b)** Over 50 antiwar church-goers carried hand-made signs.

15 *Which would you print?*

__ **a)** Prof. Anne Benson said, "Dr. Wormer is a blackmailing faggot, like my ex-husband."

__ **b)** Professor Anne Benson alleged that Dr. Wormer was "a blackmailing faggot" like her ex-husband.

__ **c)** Neither of the above.

The PRESS ROOM

WHAT DO YOU MOST RELY UPON EDITORS FOR?

I have learned — after many years of proud ignorance — that I am only as good as the editor working with me. A good editor can do everything from offer emotional support on a tough story to help you reshape the inevitably bad first draft of a long story. Conversely, a bad editor can lead you down the road to hell.

Peter Sleeth, *The Oregonian*

Making sure the narrative of the story flows, finding any holes in a story, and — yes — catching spelling, grammar and punctuation boo-boos.

Michael Becker, *Journal-Advocate*

I rely on editors to save me from myself. After a year writing for The Associated Press, I generally write pretty cleanly. Then there are those days when I produce massive brain farts and I hope and pray they yank my copy back from the writing abyss.

Carol Cole, *The Shawnee News-Star*

More than anything, I need an editor to find the holes in my stories. My copy is pretty seamless, and it can disguise a lot, even from me.

Jerry Schwartz, *The Associated Press*

When you get stumped on something or run into a reporting or writing problem, an editor can stand back and provide ideas you haven't considered. It's easy to get blinded when you've been working on a story for a long time, and a good editor will help you get through that.

Sarah Bahari, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

I rely on editors to determine which stories I need to tackle first, which ones deserve the most (or least) space and which ones I can shelve. This is important input for busy journalists who have ever-growing lists of story ideas.

Jesse Fanciulli, *Greeley Daily Tribune*

Catching tiny details like "Is it *Elisabeth* or *Elizabeth*?"

Patricia Miller, *Durango Herald*

The best editors inspire, energize, constantly question my copy and edit within the tone and cadence of my stories. Only one has done that in my career.

Mark Freeman, *Medford Mail Tribune*

This is something that is universally underappreciated and overlooked and, dammit, for me it's the most important thing *ever*: enthusiasm. I want an editor who invests as much energy and enthusiasm and spirit in a story as I do. Most of the other stuff I can get on my own (even my husband — a TV guy! — can line-edit with the best of 'em). Big-picture editing — the kind where *thinking* and brainstorming are required — is a very close second.

Beth Macy, *The Roanoke Times*

Newswriting style

You say "Mister Potato Head," I say "Mr. Potatohead." Who's right?

Historical footnote: Years ago, editors wore green eyeshades to shield their eyes from the glare of harsh newsroom lights.

When you write stories, some things are indisputable: how to spell *paraphernalia,* for example. As you type the letters, they'll either be right or wrong.

But other writing questions can't be answered so easily. For instance, one reporter might choose to write *The ten-inch T.V. costs ninety dollars.* Another might say *The 10" TV costs $90.* Both sentences look correct. But which version is preferable? And who decides?

That's where style guidelines come in.

When journalists talk about "style," they mean either:

- the way you write (in a "playful, comic style," say, as opposed to a "somber, intellectual style"), or
- the rules governing punctuation, capitalization and word usage (saying *the president was born Jan. 1* instead of *the President was born on January first).*

Every news organization customizes its style guidelines. Some outlets, such as The New York Times, refer to men as *Mr.* throughout a story; other publications discourage using such "courtesy titles." Some capitalize the *W* in *Web site*; others say *website.*

It's the copy editor's job to standardize the style in your stories — but it saves time if you know the rules, too.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS STYLEBOOK: AN INDUSTRY STANDARD

WHAT A STYLEBOOK ENTRY TELLS YOU

Entries are alphabetical, as in a dictionary. But the listings include topics such as **days of the week,** as well as specific words.

Cross-referencing helps you learn more about a topic elsewhere in the book.

Some entries simply show you the corrrect spelling, capitalization or hyphenation.

Italicized text provides examples of correct and incorrect usage.

These boldface entries show you the correct punctuation -- but they also provide background information to help you verify facts.

days of the week Capitalize them. Do not abbreviate, except when needed in a tabular format: *Sun, Mon, Tue, Wed, Thu, Fri, Sat* (three letters, without periods, to facilitate tabular composition).

See **time element**.

daytime

day to day, day-to-day Hyphenate when used as a compound modifier: *They have extended the contract on a day-to-day basis.*

D-Day June 6, 1944, the day the Allies invaded Europe in World War II.

DDT Preferred in all references for the insecticide *dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane.*

Over time, every newsroom develops style guidelines for writing about local people, places and things. Suppose the center of your campus is officially called Smith Quadrangle, but students call it "the quad." Should you refer to it that way in print? And should *quad* be capitalized?

Most publications don't have the time, energy or grammatical wisdom to grind out a comprehensive guide to the English language. So they select a proven, professional manual to serve as their official arbiter of style — and the U.S. news industry's standard is "The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law."

The Associated Press is a news cooperative providing state, national and international stories, photos and graphics to more than 15,000 news outlets around the world.

Newsrooms do use other stylebooks (The New York Times markets its style manual, for instance). But if you pursue a print reporting career, the AP stylebook is the one that's most likely to land on your desk.

HOT DOGS, POPSICLES, DUMPSTERS AND HARRY S. TRUMAN

You'll find lots of valuable writing advice inside The AP Stylebook (see next page). But if you're a word nerd, you'll be fascinated by its grammatical and factual oddities, too. For instance:

Styrofoam is a trademark for a brand of plastic foam, but it's never used to make cups. Which means there's no such thing as a *styrofoam* cup.

Heroin once was a trademark, too. But it isn't anymore. (Neither is *yo-yo.)*

It's **Smokey Bear,** not *Smokey the Bear.*

When writing about the deity, **God** is capitalized. But when cursing, use lowercase, *goddamn it.*

Dumpster is the trademarked name for a brand of trash bin, so it's always capitalized. The same goes for *Popsicle, Frisbee, Mace, Kitty Litter* and *Seeing Eye dogs.*

Pingpong is one word. So is *bonbon.* But *boo-boo* and *pooh-pooh* are hyphenated. And *ball point pen* is three words.

It's the **U.S. Navy** (capitalized), but it's the *French navy* (lowercase).

Dr Pepper: There's no period in the soft drink's name.

Harry S. Truman said there was no need for a period after his middle initial because it didn't actually stand for a name. Even though the period is often omitted (at the Harry S Truman National Historic Site, for instance), AP style requires a period after the S.

Yams are not botanically related to sweet potatoes.

Hot dogs got their name in 1906, when a cartoonist drew a dachshund wrapped in a long, narrow bun.

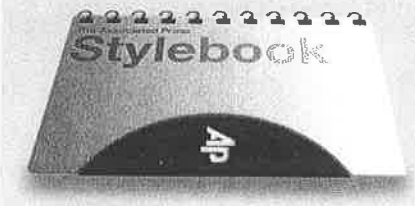
You are a **boy** or a **girl** until your 18th birthday. Then you become a *man* or a *woman.*

They're called **Canada geese.** Not *Canadian geese.*

And speaking of Canadians: It's derogatory to call them **Canucks** unless you're talking about the Vancouver hockey team, the *Canucks.*

AP STYLE HIGHLIGHTS

"The Associated Press Stylebook" is the definitive reference for reporters and editors. Whether you use the book, the website or the smartphone app, it's the first place to look when you're unsure about usage, grammar, capitalization or punctuation. Here's a roundup of the guidelines you'll use most often. (To save time later, commit these to memory.)



NUMBERS

◆ Spell out *one* through *nine*, then go to figures for *10* and up. If a sentence begins with a numeral, either spell it out or rewrite the sentence. Figures for years, however, are an exception: *2008 was an election year.*

◆ Always use numerals for ages: *He's an 8-year-old genius. The law is 1 year old.*

◆ Always use numerals in ratios: *She won the election by a 2-to-1 ratio.*

◆ For dimensions, use figures and spell out inches, feet, etc.: *She is 5 feet 9 inches tall.*

◆ Write *percent*, not *per cent* or %. Depending on the sentence, you may use either a singular or plural verb. Both of these are correct: *The teacher said 75 percent was a failing grade. As a result, 25 percent of the students were failing the class.*

◆ *Dollars and cents:* Both are written lowercase. Use a dollar sign ($) and numerals for an exact figure: *The hamburger cost $3.99.* For amounts less than a dollar, use numerals: *It cost 99 cents.* Use a $ and numerals to two decimal points for amounts of $1 million and up: *The plan costs $79.31 million.* Spell out casual uses: *I loaned her a dollar.*

TITLES

◆ Titles generally are capitalized only when used before a name: *President Roosevelt, Professor Tate, Pope John.* But when used otherwise, do not capitalize: *The president spoke to Congress. The professor scheduled a committee meeting.*

◆ Some titles are descriptive of occupations and are not capitalized: *astronaut Tom Swift, assistant coach Janet Johnson.*

◆ King, queen and other royal titles follow much the same guidelines. Capitalize them only directly before a name. *If I were a king, I'd be like King David.*

◆ Some titles are a bit more complicated, such as *former President Gerald Ford* or *acting Mayor Jill Fox.* Note that the qualifying word is not capitalized.

◆ For long titles, it's best to put them after a name for easier readability: *Jim McMullen, president of the association, wants taxes lowered.* Or, if you prefer, you can say *The president of the association, Jim McMullen, wants taxes lowered.*

CAPITALIZATION

◆ Always capitalize proper nouns: *Wally, Nike, Texas.*

◆ Capitalize common nouns when they're a part of the full name for a person, place or thing: *Republican Party, Dixon Lake, Benson Boulevard.* In other references, the nouns are not capitalized if they stand alone: *the party, the lake, the boulevard.*

◆ Some words derive from a proper noun and depend on that word for their meaning. They should be capitalized, as in *Christian, English, Marxist.* But other words no longer depend on proper nouns for their meaning: *french fries, pasteurize, venetian blind.*

◆ The first word in a sentence is always capitalized, even if it is a proper noun that otherwise is not. For instance, *e.e. cummings* is all lowercase, but at the beginning of a sentence it would be *E.e. cummings*, which looks odd and should be recast to avoid.

◆ In composition titles, the principal words in a book title, movie title and the like are capitalized, including prepositions or conjunctions of four or more letters: *"Gone With the Wind."*

ABBREVIATIONS

◆ Abbreviate these titles before a full name, except in quotations: *Dr., Gov., Lt. Gov., Mr., Mrs., Rep., the Rev.* and *Sen.* When used before a full name in a quote, spell out all except *Dr., Mr., Mrs.* and *Ms.*

◆ After a name, abbreviate *junior* or *senior* as *Jr.* or *Sr.* After the name of a business, abbreviate *company, corporation, incorporated* and *limited.*

◆ Always abbreviate *a.m., p.m., A.D.* and *B.C.*

◆ When using a month with a specific date, abbreviate *Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov.* and *Dec.* Spell out months when used alone or with a year only: *We met in December 2007, then got married on Dec. 14, 2008.*

◆ Spell out the names of all states when they stand alone. Eight states are never abbreviated: *Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas* and *Utah.* The others are abbreviated when used with the name of a city, town, etc., whether in datelines or in text. See the stylebook for the acceptable state abbreviations.

ADDRESSES

◆ Abbreviate *street, avenue* and *boulevard* when they're used with a specific address, such as *1234 Della St.*, but spell them out otherwise: *We took a drive down Electric Avenue.* Other designations, such as *court, lane* and *road*, are always spelled out.

◆ Always use figures for the address number.

◆ Spell out *First* through *Ninth* if they're street names, then go to figures after that: *222 10th Ave.*

◆ If you have a complete address, abbreviate any compass points, such as *712 Jones St. S.E.* But without an address, it's just *Southeast Jones Street* (note *Street* is spelled out and capitalized).

THE INTERNET

◆ Some basic styles: *Internet, the Net, World Wide Web, the Web, website, dot-com, JPEG, DVD, CD-ROM, online, cyberspace, email.*

◆ When listing Web addresses, use this format as a guideline: *http://www.timharrower.com*

PARENTHESES

◆ When a phrase in parentheses is inside a sentence, place the closing parenthesis inside the period: *They gave everything they had (but they still lost).* If it's a separate thought, the closing parenthesis goes outside the period: *They gave everything they had. (Unfortunately, they still lost.)*

◆ Use parentheses to insert a state name or similar information within a proper name: *She's a sports reporter at the Allentown (Pa.) Morning Call.*

◆ Do not use parentheses to set off a political designation. Instead, use commas: *Joan Jeffries, D-Fla., said Thursday that she would run for re-election next year.*

POSSESSIVES

◆ For plural nouns not ending in *s*, add *'s: men's clothing.* If they end in s, add only an apostrophe: *the dogs' leashes.*

◆ For singular nouns not ending in *s*, add *'s: the school's playground.* This applies to words ending in *x* or *z* as well.

◆ For singular common nouns ending in *s*, add *'s* unless the next word begins with *s: the waitress's order book, the waitress' sugar.*

◆ For singular proper names ending in *s*, use only an apostrophe: *Jones' music, Phyllis' car.*

◆ *It's* is not a possessive; it means only "it is." *Its* is a possessive: *A dog likes its food*, not *it's.*

PREFIXES

◆ Use a hyphen if the prefix ends in a vowel and the word that follows begins with the same vowel: *re-entry, anti-inflammatory. (Cooperate* and *coordinate* are exceptions.)

◆ Use a hyphen if the word that follows is capitalized: *The song was written by ex-Beatle Ringo Starr.*

GUIDELINES FOR SPECIFIC PREFIXES:

pre- : The stylebook does list exceptions to Webster's New World Dictionary, including *pre-empt, pre-exist* and *pre-election.*

co- : For nouns, adjectives and verbs that describe a partnership, use a hyphen: *co-author, co-worker, co-pilot.* Do not use a hyphen in other cases: *coexist, coeducational, cooperate.*

sub- : In general, no hyphen is needed: *subtotal, subcommittee, submachine gun.*

A FEW OTHER NITPICKS WORTH REMEMBERING:

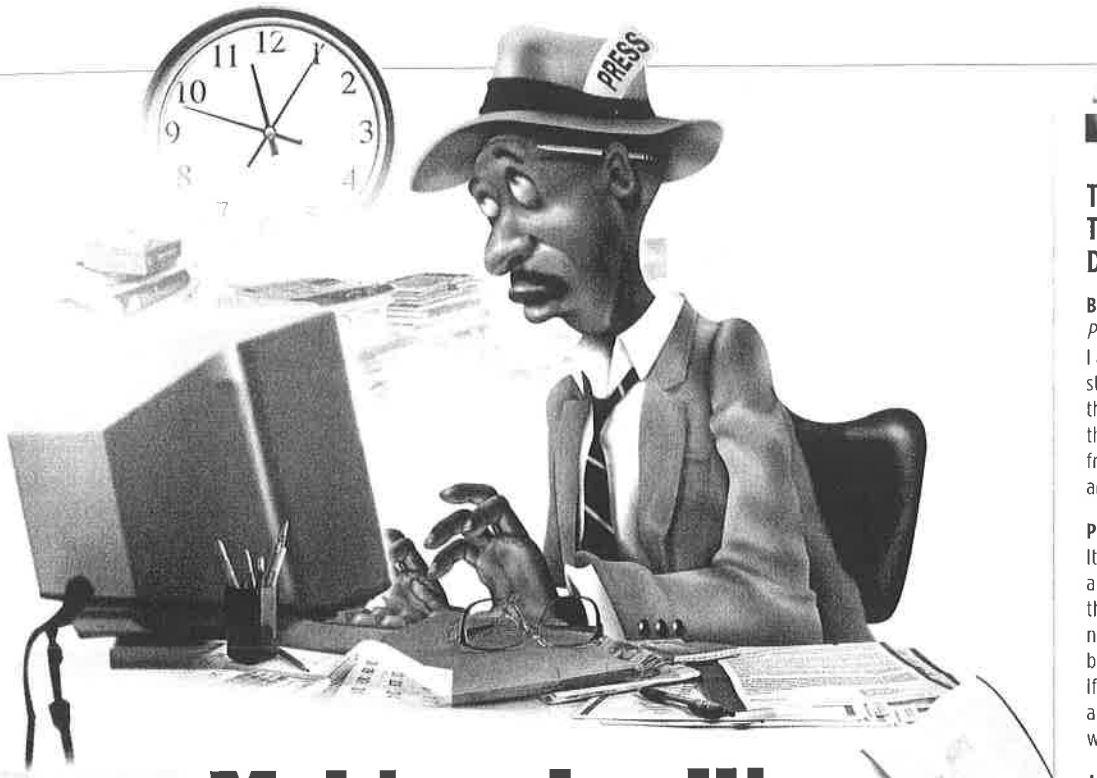
◆ It's *adviser*, not *advisor.*
◆ *amid*, not *amidst.*
◆ *minuscule*, not *miniscule.*
◆ *doughnut*, not *donut.*
◆ *amok*, not *amuck.*
◆ *Smithsonian Institution*, not *Institute.*

Further/farther:

◆ *Further* is an extension of time or degree: *We need to take this idea further.*
◆ *Farther* is used to show physical distance: *I live farther from school than you do.*

Imply/infer:

◆ You *imply* something by what you say or write.
◆ People *infer* something by reading your words.



Making deadline

When you're a reporter, you live by the clock.

In broadcasting, you measure stories in minutes and seconds. At print publications, you measure them in inches — but still, those presses roll at a set time. Which means every page must be designed, edited and proofread at a set time. Which means *you* must turn in your story at a set time — otherwise, you create headaches for lots of people.

Which makes them angry. And gets you fired.

Meeting deadlines isn't optional. It's mandatory. Sure, some stories may straggle in, a few minutes late. Sometimes they even fall through at the last minute. But every reporter realizes how career-threatening it is to blow a deadline.

Now, if you write for online publications, you might argue that there *are* no deadlines in cyberspace — that news is constantly updated around the clock. Which is true. But nevertheless, it's just a different form of deadline pressure. Editors will always be pushing you to file your stories; you'll always need to write with speed and efficiency, because the beast will always need feeding.

"In real life I am basically shy and can't do a lot of things, but on the job, the story is all that matters — the deadline is coming at you, unstoppable, like an avalanche down a mountain. You brave the wrath of crooks and cops and bad crowds and mean dogs without even seeing them. There is no time. Do what you have to and worry about it later. And fortunately, you do not worry even then, because later arrives with the hot breath of a new deadline on its heels."

Edna Buchanan,
legendary crime reporter

IDEA FILE

TIPS FROM THE PROS TO GET THAT STORY DONE BY DEADLINE

Bob Batz,
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette:
I always tell people who are stuck, including myself: Breathe, think, and then just write down the story like you'd tell it to a friend. You can always go back and fine-tune it if you have time.

Peter Sleeth, *The Oregonian:*
It helps when you are stuck on a story to realize there are just three boxes to fill: The lead, the nut graf and the explanatory body of the story, in that order. If you write each one as a stand-alone, it can help the biggest weenie get through deadline.

Jesse Fanciulli,
Greeley Daily Tribune:
Write a super-fast first draft. Just let the words tumble out, write as fast as you can and don't let your inner critic prod you into self-editing. Once you have everything you want to say down, look it over, pinpoint the angle, write the lead, reorganize, insert quotes, facts and figures, rewrite where necessary and check the facts.

Kevin Pang, *Chicago Tribune:*
If you're stuck staring at your monitor, walk away from the computer. Grab a pen and steno pad. Go to the break room and write out your story. When you're typing, the words fly on the screen almost reflexively. By writing each word out, you'll have time to think and process what you want to say, and how to say it.

Kevin Duchschere, *Star Tribune:*
Assemble the story in your head even as you're reporting it. Make mental notes to match the jottings in your notebook: an apt quote, the best scene-setter, telling details.

Jim Souhan, *Star Tribune:*
Some people freeze on deadline. My cure for that: Start typing. The simple act of typing in possible leads or details frees you up. Sometimes writing a bad lead on deadline helps you remember what a good lead looks like, and allows you to jump-start your writing.

Your story's not finished until it passes the . . .

DEADLINE CHECKLIST

ACCURACY

YES NO

☐☐ Have you checked the spelling of every name? Verified it with the actual source? (Is it *Christyn? Krystin?* Or just *Kris?)*

☐☐ Have you verified all dates, places and times of events?

☐☐ Have you personally tested all phone numbers mentioned in your story, using what you actually typed on the screen? Did someone answer and approve the number for publication?

☐☐ Have you run spell check — and then checked for spell-check errors? Double-checked all unusual spellings *(Smyth, Millar)*? Caught any homonym mix-ups *(their, there)*?

☐☐ Have you double-checked all job titles? Company names?

☐☐ Have you tested any Web links or email addresses in your story? Will all links still be valid when the story is published?

☐☐ Have you tested all the math in your story? Do the numbers and percentages correctly add up? (If in doubt, ask a colleague to recalculate your figures for you.)

☐☐ Have you checked the accuracy of facts or claims made by sources quoted in your story?

☐☐ In reviewing all the sources of information you used, are you sure that everything is reliable and up to date?

☐☐ For stories on complex topics that are new to you, have you tried running your story by an expert on the subject?

☐☐ Have you checked the accuracy of all information in related sidebars or photo captions? Does everything match what's in the story?

☐☐ Do all quotes accurately capture what was said, and convey what was *meant?* Are they clearly and correctly attributed?

☐☐ Have you added middle initials where appropriate (especially crime or court stories)?

FAIRNESS AND BALANCE

YES NO

☐☐ Is the story fair? Are all sides of the issue represented?

☐☐ Have you given all your sources an opportunity to respond to any negative charges or opinions?

☐☐ Can readers clearly tell *fact* from *opinion* in your story? Are you sure that your story doesn't disguise opinion as fact?

☐☐ Have you clearly labeled any facts that may be in dispute?

☐☐ Is there a diversity of voices quoted in the story: a representative mix of genders, races, ages, etc.?

☐☐ Have you avoided unnecessarily alluding to anyone's race or religion unless it's relevant to the topic?

WRITING STYLE

YES NO

☐☐ Does the lead or nut graf clearly state what the story's about?

☐☐ Does the story back up what's said in the lead?

☐☐ Is your lead concise? Fewer than, say, 30 words?

☐☐ Are all the five W's clearly explained without making readers dig through the rest of the story to find them?

☐☐ Does the story convey *why readers should care?*

☐☐ Have you taken pity on your readers and explained complex information in a way that ordinary folks can understand?

☐☐ Do you personally understand everything in the story?

☐☐ If appropriate, does the story give readers enough tools to get involved (phone numbers, websites, event information, organizations to contact)?

☐☐ Have you gone through the story to weed out all excess flab, like unnecessary adjectives and adverbs?

☐☐ Are sentences short enough?

☐☐ Are paragraphs short enough?

☐☐ Are sentences written in the active voice, with strong verbs?

☐☐ Have you corrected all grammar and punctuation problems?

☐☐ Have you removed all jargon and journalese?

☐☐ Have you made all clichés as scarce as hen's teeth?

☐☐ Have you ever actually seen hen's teeth? You know why you haven't? Because they are so freaking *scarce*, that's why.

☐☐ Have you eliminated inappropriate slang, such as *"freaking"*?

☐☐ Does your story avoid unconscious sexist or racist phrasing?

☐☐ Have you eliminated all dull, unnecessary, say-nothing quotes?

☐☐ Have you clearly sourced and attributed all information that's not general knowledge?

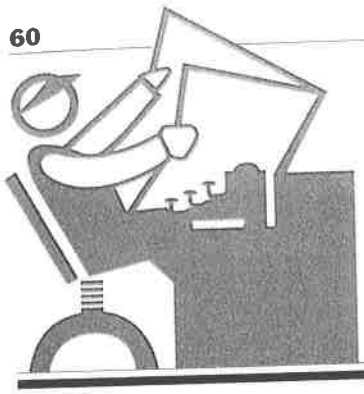
☐☐ Have you considered how your sources will react to this story? Are you sure you haven't violated their trust, included any information without their consent, or caused them any embarrassment?

☐☐ Have you refrained from mentioning yourself in the story or using "I," "me," "we" or "us" (except when quoting others)?

☐☐ Have you alerted your editors to anything in your story that readers may find offensive or objectionable?

☐☐ Have you read a printout of your story? (This will help you view the story with fresh eyes, and it may reveal errors you missed on the computer screen.)

MORE ON SOURCES▶ 70 MORE ON QUOTATIONS▶ 82 MORE ON ATTRIBUTIONS▶ 84



66 newswriting tips

Boring-but-important advice every reporter should memorize.

Luckily for you, this book won't bog itself down teaching grammar, syntax and punctuation. Instead, on these two pages we've summarized key principles every reporter should know — adapted from the "Hot 100" tips compiled by Sheryl Swingley of Ball State University.

WRITING LEADS

1) Keep leads short. The first paragraph should usually be 35 words or fewer.

2) Try to limit leads to one or two sentences.

3) Avoid starting leads with the *when* or *where* unless the time or place is unusual. Most leads start with *who* or *what.*

4) Avoid beginning leads with *there, this* or *it.*

5) Use quote and question leads sparingly.

6) The first five to 10 words determine if the lead will be an attention-getter.

7) Remember, *what happened* makes a better story than the fact that it did.

THE REST OF THE STORY

8) Vary your sentence lengths. Stories become dull when sentences are all the same length. If you notice that happening, try turning one long sentence into two or three shorter ones.

9) If you must write a long sentence, try using a short sentence before or after it.

10) Avoid using several prepositional phrases in a sentence. Prepositional phrases start with some of the following words: *about, above, against, at, between, by, down, during, for, from, in, like, on, over, through, to, toward, under, up, until, upon, with.*

11) Remember that short paragraphs encourage readers to continue reading.

12) Try to limit paragraphs to:
- 60 words or fewer, or
- no more than 10 typeset lines, or
- one to three sentences.

13) Paragraphs should generally contain only one idea.

14) Avoid introducing new information at the end of a news story. All aspects of a story should usually be introduced or outlined in the first few paragraphs.

15) Transitions — linking words such as *but, and, also, besides, however, meanwhile, subsequently, finally,* etc. — are necessary to show the reader that the writer has a sense of direction. Carefully placed transitions guide the reader from one thought to another.

EDITING AND STYLE

16) Eliminate words such as *when asked* and *concluded.* These are weak transitions. Just report what was said.

17) Whenever possible, omit the word *that.*
Example: *The quarterback says he's ready,* not *the quarterback says that he's ready.*

18) The correct order for writing *when* and *where* is time, day (date) and place: *The concert begins at 8 p.m. Friday in Fox Hall.*

19) For a past event, say it happened *Tuesday,* not *last Tuesday.* For a future event, say it will happen *Monday,* not *next Monday.* Eliminate the words *last* and *next.*

20) Use the day of the week for events occurring within six days of a specific day; use the date for events occurring seven or more days before or after a specific day.

21) On first reference, identify a person by his or her first and last names. On second reference, refer to the person by his or her last name only.

22) On second and all other references, don't use *Miss, Mrs., Ms., Mr.* or *Dr.* unless it's a style requirement of the news outlet you're writing for.

23) A long title should follow, not precede someone's name. A title that follows the name should be lowercased and set off in commas.

24) Short titles may precede names and usually are capitalized. See *titles* in the AP Stylebook.

25) Always double-check the spelling of all names.

26) Use the computer's spell-checker. When in doubt, consult a dictionary. The latest edition of "Webster's New World College Dictionary" is the preferred reference.

27) For style questions, consult the AP stylebook. If the answer cannot be found there, consult a dictionary or a grammar guide.

28) Ask for help. Public library information desk personnel can be resourceful and helpful in person or on the phone. (University librarians are usually better at offering advice face to face.)

RULES OF GRAMMAR

29) If *none* means *no one* or *not one,* use a singular verb.
Example: None *was* found guilty.

30) When you use a pronoun to refer to a team or a group, the proper pronoun to use is *its,* not *they.*
Example: The *team* wants to improve *its* record.

31) Use parallel construction for verbs in lists or sequences.
Example: He likes camp*ing,* fish*ing* and hunt*ing.*
NOT: He likes camp*ing,* fish*ing* and *to hunt.*
Example: The fire *killed* six people, *injured* 60 more and *forced* hundreds of residents to leave their homes..
NOT: The fire *killed* six people, *injuring* 60 more, and *will force* hundreds of residents to leave their homes.

32) When using *either...or* and *neither...nor,* the verb agrees in person with the nearer subject.
Examples: Either the coach or the *players are* to blame. Neither the players nor the *coach is* to blame.

33) Know the difference between *its* (no apostrophe for possessive pronoun) and *it's* (the contraction for *it is).*
Examples: The dog has a thorn in *its* (possessive pronoun) paw, and *it's* (contraction) time to remove it.

34) Know the difference between *whose* (possessive pronoun) and *who's* (the contraction for *who is).*
Examples: *Whose* (possessive pronoun) coat is this? *Who's* (contraction) wearing it?

35) Know when to use *their* (possessive pronoun), *there* (adverb) and *they're* (the contraction for they are).
Examples: It is *their* (possessive pronoun) project. The project is over *there* (adverb). *They're* (contraction) working on it.

36) When making comparisons, *as* and *such as* are generally preferable to *like.* Use *like* as a preposition, not to introduce clauses.
Examples: It tastes *like* a peach.
The farmer grows peaches, *as* he did last year.

WORD CHOICES

37) Eliminate lazy adverbs. Let strong verbs do their jobs. Instead of *the radio played loudly,* write *the radio blared.*

38) Eliminate lazy adjectives. Let strong nouns do their jobs. Instead of *the gang members created a chaotic scene,* write *the gangsters created chaos.*

39) Choose strong verbs that suggest what they mean. Active verbs add pace, clarity and vigor to writing. Avoid *be* verbs.

40) Use simple words. Don't send readers to the dictionary. Odds are they won't bother looking up definitions; worse, they might quit reading.

41) Words such as *thing* and *a lot* annoy many readers and editors. Choose better synonyms. (Note correct spelling of *a lot.*)

42) Be careful using the word *held.* Make sure the object can be held physically.
Weak: *The Rotary Club meeting will be held at noon Monday in Room 125.*
Better: *The Rotary Club will meet at noon Monday in Room 125.*

43) Avoid using words that qualify how someone feels, thinks or sees. Qualifiers include the following: *a bit, a little, sort of, kind of, rather, around, quite, very, pretty, much, in a very real sense, somewhat.*

44) If you use jargon that won't be understood by a majority of readers, be sure to explain each term used.

45) Writing *yesterday* or *tomorrow* may be confusing to readers. Use the day of the week. (*Today* may be used with care.)

46) Give a person's age if necessary for identification or description; it's preferable to saying *teenager* or *senior citizen.* Write *Jim Shu, 30,* instead of *30-year-old Jim Shu.*

47) For suicides, until the coroner completes his or her investigation, it's best to say the person *was found dead* or *fell* or *plunged to his death.* (Some papers avoid using the word *suicide;* check with your editor.)

48) For arrests, write *arrested in connection with, sought in connection with, charged with* or *arrested on charges of.*

49) For murders, write that arrests are made *in connection with the death of.* Do not report that a victim was murdered until someone is convicted of the crime. In obituaries, it may be said the victim was *killed* or *slain.*

50) For fires, write that a building is *destroyed,* not *completely destroyed.* Buildings also are damaged *lightly, moderately* or *heavily.* A fire may *gut* or *destroy* the interior of a building. To *raze* a building is to level it to the ground.

NONSEXIST, NONAGEIST, NONDISCRIMINATORY WORD CHOICES

51) Avoid words that reinforce ethnic, racial, gender or ageist stereotypes.

52) Avoid referring to someone's ethnicity, race, gender or age unless it's essential for the clarity of the story. (Race might be relevant when a criminal is at large; referring to ethnicity, race, gender, age or disability might be appropriate when an achievement or event is a first.) Use the substitution test: If you wouldn't say it about a Caucasian man, then don't say it about a woman, people of other races or people with disabilities.

53) Use *he or she* instead of *he.* Women do notice the difference. If using *he or she* or *him or her* is awkward, try a plural pronoun: *they, them, their* or *theirs.*

54) Substitute asexual words for sexist *man* words. For example:

QUESTIONABLE	BETTER
mankind	people, humanity
man-made	synthetic, manufactured
manpower	workers, work force, staff, personnel
founding fathers	pioneers, colonists, patriots, forebears
anchorman	anchor
cleaning woman	housekeeper, custodian
coed	student
fireman	firefighter
foreman	supervisor
housewife	homemaker
postman	letter carrier
policeman	police officer
salesman	salesperson
stewardess	flight attendant
weatherman	meteorologist
the girls (for women over 18)	the women

55) Respect people with disabilities:

crippled	impaired, disabled — or be specific: paraplegic
deaf and dumb, deaf mute	hearing- and/or speech-impaired
crazy, insane, half-witted, retarded	mentally ill, developmentally disadvantaged, disabled, limited — or be specific: emotionally disturbed

Separate the person from the disability.

Mary, an epileptic, had no trouble doing her job.	Mary, who has epilepsy, had no trouble doing her job.

Examples adapted from an International Association of Business Communicators' book called "Without Bias."

PUNCTUATION

56) No comma should appear between time, date and place.
Example: *The fire started at 4:32 a.m. Monday in the kitchen of Bob's Bakery.*

57) In a series — *red, white and blue* — a comma is usually not needed before *and* unless the series is complex or confusing.

58) Use a comma with *according to.*
Example: *Dogs are becoming more intelligent, according to researchers at Penn State University.*

59) Avoid comma splices: joining two independent clauses with a comma.
Example: *Half the company's customers lost power after the ice storm, power was restored to most of them quickly.* (A period or semicolon should replace the comma.)

60) Another common problem: adding a comma between the subject and the verb.
Example: *About half of the company's customers, lost power after the ice storm.* (The comma is not needed.)

61) When in doubt about using a comma, leave it out.

62) Quotation marks always go outside commas (,") and periods (."). They always go inside semicolons (";) and colons (":). They may go inside or outside of question marks. Check the AP stylebook.

63) The dash is a long mark (—) most often used to separate a list or series in sentences where extra commas might be confusing. **Example:** *All these punctuation marks — commas, periods, dashes, hyphens — have their own peculiarities.*
Dashes also provide a way to insert interruptions or dramatic phrases.
Example: *All these tips — don't worry, we're nearly done — are important to know.*

64) The hyphen is a short mark (-) used in hyphenated modifiers *(two-week workshop, well-read student),* in words that break at the end of a line of type (like this *hyphenated* word here), in telephone numbers and Social Security numbers. Don't hyphenate adverbs ending in "ly" paired with adjectives: It's a *freshly painted room,* not a *freshly-painted room.*

65) Use an exclamation point only after brief expletives.
Examples: *Fire! Run! Goal!*
Exclamation points often demonstrate a lack of control (or excess of emotion) on the writer's part. Use them sparingly.

66) If you ever catch yourself overusing a particular set of punctuation marks — dashes, parentheses, semicolons — force yourself to stop. Remember, simple sentence structures are always best.

Answers to these exercises are on page 307.

1 CHOOSE THE BEST LEAD

Decide which lead is preferable and determine what's wrong with the others.

1. ___ a) At Lyman Airport, a helicopter crashed Friday night, killing the pilot.
___ b) A helicopter pilot died after crashing at Lyman Airport Friday night.
___ c) A helicopter pilot died in a tragic crash at Lyman Airport Friday night.

2. ___ a) The Oakdale City Council met Tuesday to approve a plan to increase residential water rates.
___ b) The Oakdale City Council voted 5-2 to approve a 20 percent increase in residential water rates on Tuesday.
___ c) If you live in Oakdale, your water bill will increase by 20 percent — an average of $12 a month — beginning Oct. 1.

3. ___ a) On Saturday, June 3, two local students won a statewide dance championship.
___ b) Lena Genst and Nadia Hedd twirled to victory Saturday at the prestigious FSSA State Dance Championships.
___ c) Two Kennedy High seniors won $1,000 Saturday after finishing first in a statewide dance contest.

4. ___ a) A Spudville man named Robbin Banks was arrested after robbing a bank Friday.
___ b) Police arrested a Spudville man Friday and charged him with bank robbery. The man's name: Robbin Banks.
___ c) Spudville police arrested a man named Robbin Banks Friday. His crime: robbing banks.

5. ___ a) Pneumonia has taken the life of Justin Case, the oldest prisoner in Florida history.
___ b) Justin Case, the oldest prisoner ever to serve in a Florida prison, died Sunday of pneumonia.
___ c) Florida's oldest prisoner has died at 97.

2 TOO MUCH OPINION?

Read the following excerpts and decide: Is the wording appropriate, or has the reporter colored the story with too much opinion?

1) Moe Mentum's futile campaign came to a disappointing end last night as the candidate conceded defeat before 200 loyal supporters.

2) Moe Mentum's grass-roots campaign came to an end last night as the exhausted candidate conceded defeat before 200 cheering supporters.

3) Logging continued in Conifer National Forest yesterday, despite howls of protest from liberal legislators and environmental radicals who assailed timber workers as "rapists."

4) Legendary geezers the Rolling Stones will rock Memorial Coliseum tonight as they kick off the first of three highly anticipated weekend concerts.

5) *From "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart":*
Jon Stewart: What's your overall sense of the mood down on the Republican convention floor? How did it feel to be there last night during the speech?
Stephen Colbert: Well, John, as a journalist I have to maintain my objectivity, but I would say the feeling down here was one of a pervasive and palpable evil: a thick demonic stench that rolls over you and clings like hot black tar, a nightmare from which you cannot awaken, a nameless fear that lives in the dark spaces beyond your peripheral vision and drives you toward inhuman cruelties and unspeakable perversions — the delegates' bloated, pustulent bodies twisting from one obscene form to another, giant spider-shaped and ravenous wolf-headed creatures who feast upon the flesh of the innocent and suck the marrow from the bones of the poor.

3 UNSCRAMBLE THE FIVE W's

We've scrambled the basic facts from four different news stories. Sort them out to determine which facts most logically belong together — then write the leads for each of these stories for a publication in Dayton, Nebraska.

WHO	WHAT	WHEN	WHERE	WHY
Abner Hoobler	Was swept over Niagara Falls and lived	Tuesday night	The Living Jungle at the Dayton Zoo	Claimed he spends too much time clowning around with his friends
Victor, a labrador retriever	Glued a clown mask to her husband's face while he was sleeping	Easter Sunday	The bedroom of a house in North Dayton	Becomes the first Nebraskan to be 115 years old
Carlotta Tendant	Bitten in the leg by a lion	Midnight tonight	Niagara Falls, N.Y.	Jumped out of a pickup truck while his family stopped at Waffle Hut
Rev. Faith Christian, minister at the Dayton Zealotic Church	Celebrates birthday	7 a.m. Saturday	Twilight Nursing Home in Dayton	Says she leaped over the wall to convert the beast to Christianity, shouting "Jesus will save you"

4 BOIL DOWN THESE LONG-WINDED LEADS

Here's how two different news stories actually started. Can you condense their essential facts into tighter, more effective leads?

1) The Rev. Thomas J. Reese, an American Jesuit who is a frequent television commentator on Roman Catholic issues, resigned Wednesday under orders from the Vatican as editor of the Catholic magazine America because he had published articles critical of church positions, several Catholic officials in the United States reported.

2) What should have been a fun and exciting weekend turned into a destruction derby for some PCC students. It is a norm for students to gather to celebrate the weekend. Excessive damage was caused to the campus this weekend when some parties got out of control. What was the main cause of it all?

"It's typically directly related to alcohol consumption and too much of it," Nate Buseman, Director of Housing, said.

The suites were the main site of destruction over the weekend. Buseman said bannisters were splintered, emergency lights broken, a window shattered and one of the doors was damaged due to abnormal bending at the top of the door frame.

5 SUPPLY THE MISSING NUT GRAF

This story is missing a nut graf. Write one and stick it where it belongs.

When Tad Pole left the Lawton Library last Tuesday afternoon, he couldn't believe his eyes.

"My bike was gone," he said. "That's the third bike I've had stolen this year. I had a huge honkin' lock on it, too."

Lynn O'Leum had an expensive mountain bike stolen from outside Hoobler Hall last week. "I know at least three other people whose bikes have been boosted this year," she says. "That's it. From now on, I'm walking."

Even Helmut Laws, president of the campus cycling club, had his bike stolen during a club meeting last month.

"I've never seen anything like this," said Seymour Butts, campus security chief. "Whether it's one thief or a whole gang, we can't be sure. But it's an epidemic."

In an average year, 50 bicycles are reported stolen. So far this year, that number is 230, an all-time high. . . .

6 WRITE THIS NEWS BRIEF

Here are the facts for a short news story. Decide what's important and write the story.

- Laura Lynn Hardy is 19.
- She's a yoga instructor with red hair.
- She lives in Locust Valley, 10 miles west of Lincoln, in an old farmhouse.
- She ate lunch in Lincoln last Friday, Dec. 24, with her ailing grandfather.
- After lunch, while cycling past Lincoln Federal Savings, she saw a thick manila envelope on the sidewalk.
- She was in a hurry, so she stopped, put it in her backpack and bicycled home.
- When Hardy opened the envelope at home, she found it contained a total of $300,000 in cash and checks made out to Fenster Ford.
- Fenster Ford is owned by Fred Fenster. It's the area's largest car dealer.
- Hardy immediately phoned the bank and told them about the envelope.
- She then rode her bike back to Lincoln.
- It was snowing. A total of six inches of snow eventually fell by morning.
- Around 5 p.m., Hardy arrived at the bank. Xavier Mooney, president of Lincoln Federal Savings, was there. So was Fred Fenster.
- They thanked Hardy and shook her hand while posing for photos.
- Hardy then rode back home.
- When contacted by phone, Hardy said, "It's enough just to do the right thing."
- When contacted by phone, Fenster said, "She's a great little girl, the kind of girl we in Lincoln should be proud of."

7 CHOOSE THE CORRECT GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION AND STYLE

Which of these versions is correct? (These exercises use "The Associated Press Stylebook" to settle all disputes.)

1. __ a) It's not OK to wear T-shirts at practice, coach Carter said.
__ b) It's not okay to wear tee shirts at practice, Coach Carter said.

2. __ a) General Myers met ten times with former vice president Gore.
__ b) Gen. Myers met 10 times with former Vice President Gore.

3. __ a) He drove East from Seattle, Washington to Boise, Idaho.
__ b) He drove east from Seattle, Wash., to Boise, Idaho.

4. __ a) The FBI office has moved to 1250 Third Ave.
__ b) The F.B.I. office has moved to 1,250 3rd Avenue.

5. __ a) In the 90's she received mostly A's in school despite being a rock-and-roll groupie.
__ b) In the '90s, she received mostly A's in school despite being a rock 'n' roll groupie.

6. __ a) Aaron C. Reskew Jr. is the candidate who will be elected mayor.
__ b) Aaron C. Reskew, Jr. is the candidate that will be elected Mayor.

7. __ a) 17 clerks worked from 7-10 a.m. in the morning and were paid just five dollars an hour.
__ b) Seventeen clerks worked from 7 to 10 a.m. and were paid just $5 an hour.

8. __ a) Over 16,000 attended Game 1 of the world series to see the Tiger's 5-to-2 victory.
__ b) More than 16,000 attended Game One of the World Series to see the Tigers' 5-2 victory.

9. __ a) Nearly 50 percent of adults say they're concerned about developing Alzheimer's disease.
__ b) Nearly 50% of adults say they're concerned about developing Alzheimers Disease.

10. __ a) The nineteen-year-old girl was born September 20.
__ b) The 19-year-old woman was born Sept. 20.

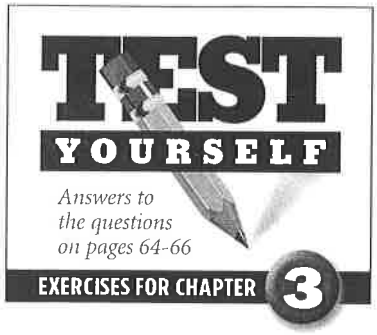
C: Yes. This is dull-but-important news for local readers.
D: No. Never.

8) A doctoral psychology student at Springfield College believes that tattoos lower your IQ.

A: No. Without scientific evidence, this is just a flaky student's crackpot theory. Conduct legitimate research and produce reliable data — *then* we'll talk.
B: No. We don't consider unprovable opinions to be news.
C: No. We don't consider unprovable opinions to be news.
D: Yes. And let's illustrate the story by showing some dumb-looking guy with *lots* of tattoos.

3 WHAT'S IT CALLED?

1. Cutline (or caption)
2. Attribution
3. Beat
4. Headline
5. Byline
6. News
7. Lead
8. Liftout quote
9. Dateline
10. Jump



1 CHOOSE THE BEST LEAD

1) The best lead is *b*. It's simple and straightforward, putting the basic facts in the right order.

Example *a:* It's not as strong when you lead with the *where* (Lyman Airport).

Example *c:* The word "tragic" is unnecessary. Most editors would remove it.

2) The best lead is *c*. Example *a* uses a weak topic lead, and starts by telling readers that *the city council met.* Big deal. The phrasing is awkward, too: *to approve a plan to increase.*

Example *b* offers more detail, although that 5-2 vote tally isn't worth including in the lead. And the wording makes it seem as though the water rates go up on Tuesday.

But *c* uses an effective, reader-friendly approach. *If you live in Oakdale* will immediately grab your attention — if you live in Oakdale, that is. (If you don't, you may tune out the story, but that's expected.) The lead then explains why this matters to you: *Your water bill is increasing.* And to Oakdale citizens, that's the real meaning of this news. In subsequent paragraphs, the story will explain why the council took this action.

Some editors and instructors will balk at using a direct-address lead in a news story. But as we'll see in Chapter 5 (on covering meetings), it's an effective way to alert readers that this news affects *you.*

3) The best lead is *c*. Example *a* begins clumsily with the date, including the unnecessary *June 3.* Example *b* leads with the girls' names, but since most readers won't recognize them, it's better to use a delayed-identification lead, as *c* does. And the phrase *twirled to victory* is vague and possibly condescending: If you'd spent hundreds of hours honing your dancing skills, would you want them described as *twirling?*

4) The best lead is *b*. Why? You can't legally prove that Robbin Banks is guilty of any crime, so it's wrong to say *he was arrested after robbing a bank* or that *his crime was robbing banks.* Both of those phrases brand him as guilty; if he's actually innocent, he could sue you for libel. To be safe, as we'll explore in Chapter 5 (on covering crime), the best wording is found in example *b.*

One other problem: Example *c* spoils the punch line. The guy's name looks like it could be *Robbin Banks Friday.*

5) The best lead is *c*. It's short. Simple. It sets up the story without clutter. The details — his name, the pneumonia, the all-time record — will follow in paragraphs two and three.

Neither *a* nor *b* is bad, however. But a delayed-identification lead is preferable if the name isn't recognizable (or humorous, as in question 4).

Other problems: Example *a* begins with the word *pneumonia,* which simply isn't a crucial element of the story. And there's no *when* in that sentence.

Example *b* uses the word *prison* twice in the same awkward phrase (*the oldest prisoner ever to serve in a Florida prison).*

2 TOO MUCH OPINION?

1) Moe Mentum's futile campaign came to a disappointing end last night as the candidate conceded defeat before 200 loyal supporters.

There's too much opinion in this sentence, making it more commentary than newswriting. Three adjectives are to blame:

Futile: His campaign was pointless? Doomed? That's an opinion, and a negative one.

Disappointing: To whom? Obviously, the majority of the voters in this election aren't depressed.

Loyal: If you can't look into the hearts of all of his supporters, you can't judge if they're all truly loyal, can you? (Some of them might be spies from his opponent's campaign staff.)

2) Moe Mentum's grass-roots campaign came to an end last night as the exhausted candidate conceded defeat before 200 cheering supporters.

This sentence is more accurate. Three adjectives provide description, but in an acceptably neutral way:

Grass-roots: This isn't meant as an insult; it describes a campaign that relies on citizen involvement instead of major political-party support.

Exhausted: If it's clear that the candidate is acting fatigued — or better yet, if he admits it — it's appropriate to note it here.

Cheering: If you observe that everyone in the room is, in fact, clapping and yelling, this observation is accurate.

3) Logging continued in Conifer National Forest yesterday, despite howls of protest from liberal legislators and environmental radicals who assailed timber workers as "rapists."

This lead unfairly sides with the loggers. Its wording creates the kind of negative spin that talk-show radio hosts do best: It discredits the opposition by unfairly branding them all as either *liberals* or *radicals*, trivializing complex arguments to *howls of protest*. We're not told who called timber workers *rapists*, but emphasizing such a sensational-yet-unsourced quote seems deliberately inflammatory. One ugly word hurled by an angry protester does not fairly characterize the attitude of the entire group.

It would be just as biased — and unfair — to word that lead in a way that favors the environmentalists. For example:

Hundreds of tearful schoolchildren gathered in Riley Plaza yesterday to protest the timber industry's relentless destruction of giant redwoods in Conifer National Forest.

4) Legendary geezers the Rolling Stones will rock Memorial Coliseum tonight as they kick off the first of three highly anticipated weekend concerts.

In feature writing, especially in stories about pop culture, you can usually adopt a more playful tone than straight news stories allow — but it's a fine line, hard to define. Overt bias or negativity is inappropriate, but it's OK to reflect prevailing cultural attitudes.

For instance, virtually everyone agrees that the Stones *are* rock legends. And their age is often a factor in news coverage about the band: it's ironic and amusing to see sixtysomethings continuing to act like teenagers. Here, the word *geezer* is used with affection toward major celebrities; it would have an entirely different, crueler meaning if you called an aging school superintendent a geezer.

In subsequent paragraphs, this story will quote fans who are excited about the concert — so describing the show as *highly anticipated* accurately reflects the content of the story.

5) This is a parody of a traditional news report, something "The Daily Show" and Stephen Colbert have mastered brilliantly over the years. It's satire, as biased as humanly possible (but notice how terrific those descriptions are).

3 UNSCRAMBLE THE FIVE W'S

Here are the most logical ways to combine those five W's, and the leads that result:

1) At midnight tonight, Abner Hoobler will become the first Nebraskan to reach the age of 115.

Notice that we led with the *when* — which is a bit unusual — because this story is based on time and timing. We've also identified Abner by name in our lead (instead of calling him *a Dayton man)* because Abner is a local celebrity, and it makes this neighborly news story more folksy and friendly.

Notice, too, that we're saving the local *where* for the second or third paragraph. The big *where* (Nebraska) is more significant than the nursing-home *where*.

2) A dog named Victor plunged over Niagara Falls Saturday — and emerged victorious.

Playing with the dog's name gives the story greater appeal than simply saying *a dog*.

Or to take a different approach:

While his family ate breakfast Saturday, Victor the dog went for a swim — over Niagara Falls.

Notice how using a dash forces the reader to pause a moment before reading that final phrase. The lead is set up like a joke, where a slight delay gives the punch line more pizazz.

3) A Dayton woman decided her husband spent too much time clowning around with his friends, so she glued a clown mask to his face while he was sleeping.

We left the *where*, the *when* and the woman's name for later paragraphs. The most important thing is to emphasize the clown angle as effectively as possible.

4) A local minister was bitten in the leg Sunday after leaping into the lions' den at the Dayton Zoo.

Rev. Faith Christian, a minister at the Dayton Zealotic Church, said she was trying to convert the lion to Christianity by shouting "Jesus loves you."

Conveying all that information in one sentence is extremely difficult; you run the risk of writing a "suitcase lead," one that bulges like an overstuffed bag. The solution above saves the *why* for the second paragraph while using a delayed-identification lead.

To write a slightly longer one-sentence lead, you could try this:

A local evangelist who leapt into the Dayton Zoo lions' den and shouted "Jesus will save you" was lucky to escape with just a bite in the leg when she tried converting the king of beasts to Christianity.

But many editors would argue that this long lead is so saturated with information that it bogs down.

4 BOIL DOWN THESE LONG-WINDED LEADS

1) The editor of the Catholic magazine America was forced by the Vatican to resign Wednesday after publishing articles critical of church positions.

2) Student drinking may be to blame for damage to campus windows, lights and doors last weekend, a school official said.

Or, if you want to lead with the damage:

Damage to campus windows, lights and doors last weekend may have been the result of student drinking, a school official said.

5 SUPPLY THE MISSING NUT GRAF

When Tad Pole left the Lawton Library last Tuesday afternoon, he couldn't believe his eyes.

"My bike was gone," he said. "That's the third bike I've had stolen this year. I had a huge honkin' lock on it, too."

Pole isn't alone. Campus bicycle thefts have hit an all-time high this year. On average, 50 bikes are reported stolen annually, but so far this year, that number is 230.

"I've never seen anything like this," said Seymour Butts, campus security chief. "Whether it's one thief or a whole gang, we can't be sure. But it's an epidemic."

Lynn O'Leum had an expensive mountain bike stolen from outside Hoobler Hall last week. "I know at least three other people whose bikes have been boosted this year," she says. "That's it. From now on, I'm walking."

Even Helmut Laws, president of the campus cycling club, had his bike stolen during a club meeting last month. . . .

6 WRITE THIS NEWS BRIEF

Some people would just take the money and run.

But when Laura Lynn Hardy found $300,000 lying on the street, she bicycled 20 miles through a Christmas Eve snowstorm to return the cash to its rightful owner.

After lunching in Lincoln last Friday, Hardy spotted a thick manila envelope on the sidewalk in front of Lincoln Federal Savings. The 19-year-old yoga instructor tossed it in her backpack and pedaled home to Locust Valley.

When she opened the envelope, Hardy discovered $300,000 in cash and checks payable to Fenster Ford, the area's largest car dealer.

Hardy alerted the bank, hopped back on her bike and raced to Lincoln just as snow was starting to fall. She was greeted at the bank by its president, Xavier Mooney, and by Fred Fenster, owner of Fenster Ford.

The trio posed for photos, shook hands and exchanged holiday wishes. As darkness fell, Hardy hopped back on her bike and rode home.

Her reward for being so honest? A handshake.

"It's enough just to do the right thing," Hardy said.

There are other ways to begin this story. You could try a direct-address lead:

What would you do if you found $300,000? If you're Laura Lynn Hardy, you'd give the money right back.

Though question leads are often lazy and obvious (which is why editors warn against them), they can hook readers into stories if they're skillfully worded.

You could also adopt the point of view of the men whose money was lost:

Two Lincoln businessmen were relieved to receive a last-minute gift from a good Samaritan on Christmas Eve.

The gift? A missing envelope worth $300,000.

But the most logical focus for the lead is Laura Lynn Hardy. She's the star of the story — and once your lead sets up the situation, no matter what approach you take, most of your story will become a chronological narrative that describes her actions.

Now, many readers might feel that this story is *really* about something that's not explicitly stated in the facts: Laura Lynn Hardy got stiffed. After all she went through — bicycling 20 miles in the snow as darkness fell — on Christmas Eve, yet — the two wealthiest men in town didn't even *insist* on some kind of reward? A hundred dollars? A car? Free checking? *Anything?*

After finding $300,000 on the street, Laura Lynn Hardy bicycled 20 miles through a Christmas Eve snowstorm to return the money to two of the wealthiest men in town.

The reward for her honesty? A warm handshake.

Yes, many readers will agree that those two rich men *should* have insisted on rewarding Hardy. And many journalists will be offended by the sexism in Fenster's condescending quote. Still, some editors will say this lead is too judgmental, crossing the line between news reporting and commentary. To learn more about the difference between the two, see page 134.

7 CHOOSE THE CORRECT GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION AND STYLE

1) *Correct answer: a.* The AP stylebook says that it's *OK*, not *okay* or *o.k.* People wear *T-shirts*. And *coach* is a job description, not a formal title, so it does not need to be capitalized.

2) *Correct answer: b.* Military titles are abbreviated before proper names, so it's *Gen.*, not spelled out as *General*. Numerals 10 and above use figures; below 10, they're spelled out. And *vice president* is a formal title that's capitalized (but not abbreviated) before someone's name.

3) *Correct answer: b.* Compass directions *(east, west)* are generally lowercase; they're capitalized when they indicate regions *(the South)*. Long state names are capitalized and set off by commas when they follow city names; short state names *(Ohio, Idaho, etc.)* aren't capitalized.

4) *Correct answer: a.* *FBI* uses no periods. Numbered streets use words *(First, Third)* if they're lower than 10; higher-numbered streets use numerals *(12th, 42nd)*. Street addresses use no commas. And *avenue* is abbreviated when it's part of a street address.

5) *Correct answer: b.* Decades are abbreviated with apostrophes before the numeral, not after *('90s, not 90's)*. Single letters are made plural by adding *apostrophe s (A's)*, although multiple-letter combinations don't add apostrophes *(ABCs)*. And speaking of apostrophes: it's written as *rock 'n' roll*.

6) *Correct answer: a.* When the abbreviation for *junior* follows a complete name, it's written *Jr.* but not set off by a comma. *Who*, not *that*, is the pronoun used for people (and animals with names). And *mayor* is a formal title that's capitalized only when it precedes a name.

7) *Correct answer: b.* When a number begins a sentence, it's generally spelled out. Use *from* and *to* together, as a pair, rather than adding a hyphen. It's redundant to say *10 a.m. in the morning*. Use figures and dollar signs *($5)* in most references to money.

8) *Correct answer: b.* *Over* usually refers to spatial relationships *(the bird flew over the lake)*; for numerals, use *more than*. Capitalize *World Series*. When plural proper nouns end in *s*, just add an apostrophe to make them possessive. And sports scores use hyphens *(5-2)*, not the word *to*.

9) *Correct answer: a.* Spell out the word *percent* (one word, not *per cent*). And it's *Alzheimer's disease*.

10) *Correct answer: b.* Use numerals for all ages. After age 18, refer to *boys* and *girls* as *men* and *women*. Abbreviate September when it's used in a date.

8 CRAFTING CLEVER LEADS FOR BRITES

Here are the leads that originally began those four brites. There are other possibilities, of course — and yours may be more clever than these.

1) Linc and Helena Moore may have finally learned the answer to that age-old question: Why did the chicken cross the road?

Because chickens don't know jaywalking is illegal.

2) Computer programmer Steve Relles has the poop on what to do when your job is outsourced to India.

3) Rick O'Shea was listed in serious condition Sunday at Park West Hospital — but he's in better shape than earlier, when he was declared dead.

4) At the London Zoo, you can talk to the animals — and now some of them talk back.

—Stories 1, 3 and 4 reprinted from The Associated Press; story 2 reprinted from Reuters