

# News Leads

- **Summary Lead**
  - **Be Concise**
  - **Be Specific**
  - **Use Strong, Active Verbs**
  - **Emphasize the Story**
  - **Stress the Unusual**
  - **Localize and Update Your Lead**
  - **Be Objective**
  - **Attribute Opinions**
  - **Strive for Simplicity**
  - **Begin With News**
  - **Emphasize the News**

## Other Types of Leads

- **Multi-paragraph Leads**
- **Quotation Leads**
- **Question Leads**
- **Suspenseful Leads**
- **Descriptive Leads**
- **Shocking Leads—With A Twist**
- **Ironic Leads**
- **Direct-Address Leads**
- **Other Unusual Leads**

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- **Avoid “Agenda” Leads**
- **Avoid “Label” Leads**
- **Avoid Lists**
- **Avoid Stating the Obvious**
- **Avoid the Negative**
- **Avoid Exaggeration**
- **Avoid Misleading Readers**

## **Some Other Lead Tips**

- **Break the Rules**
- **Remember Your Readers**
- **Rewrite Leads**

### **CHECKLIST FOR WRITING LEADS**

1. Be specific rather than vague and abstract.
2. Avoid stating the obvious or the negative.
3. Emphasize your story's most unusual or unexpected developments.
4. Emphasize your story's most interesting and important developments.
5. Emphasize your story's magnitude and its impact on its participants and readers.
6. Use complete sentences, the proper tense and all the necessary articles—"a," "an" and "the."
7. Be concise. If it exceeds three typed lines, examine a lead critically to determine whether it is wordy or repetitious or contains some unnecessary details. If so, rewrite it.
8. Avoid writing a label lead that reports your story's topic but not what was said or done about it.
9. Begin your lead with the news--the main point of the story--not the attribution or the time and place your story occurred.
10. Use a relatively simple sentence structure and avoid beginning the lead with a long phrase or clause.

11. Use strong, active and descriptive verbs rather than passive ones.
12. Avoid using in your lead unfamiliar names and names requiring lengthy identification that could be reported in a later paragraph.
13. Attribute any quotation or statement of opinion appearing in the lead.
14. Localize the lead, and emphasize the latest developments, preferably what happened today or yesterday.
15. Eliminate statements of opinion, including one-word labels such as "interesting" and "alert."
16. Remember your readers. Write a lead that is clear, concise and interesting and that emphasizes the details most likely to affect and interest your readers.
17. Read the lead aloud to be certain that it is clear, concise and easy to understand.

Fred Fedler—*Reporting for the Media*

## Leading questions & answers

**S**killed writers write leads to their stories that are compelling, clear and concise. But copy editors sometimes encounter leads that do not meet those important standards. In such instances, the editor is obliged to improve the lead's quality. Here are some of the issues that arise in flawed leads.

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**Wordy Leads:** Most brief statements are easy to understand. Leads need to be easily understood. So brief leads are desirable. But leads must give the reader the essence of the story. Often that obligation tempts a reporter to load up the lead with a horde of facts and scores of words. Writers (or their copy editors) rebuffed such temptation when creating these classic leads:

## Examples:

Today, the Japanese fleet submitted itself to the destinies of war -- and lost.

The moon still shines on the moonshine stills in the hills of Pennsylvania.

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. (Book of Genesis)

Only in Russia could Peter and the Wolf die on the same night. (Stalin's death)

Fifty thousand Irishmen -- by birth, by adoption and by profession -- marched up Fifth Avenue today.

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**Misleading Leads:** A writer's determination to write a compelling lead can prompt such sins as distortion, overstatement and editorializing. Copy editors must prune away any such flaws. The lead should be a straightforward summary of the story or its essence. It should accurately set the mood and tone of the story. It should guide, induce and direct. But it must be accurate and supported by the body of the story. Good editors avidly combat misleading leads. An important tip: Whenever possible, read a story through before you begin to edit. That gives you a broader perspective from which to work, which will improve your editing. It also provides an opportunity to determine if the writer has captured what the story really is (or, at least, what the writer is trying to tell you what the story really is.)

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**Illogical Leads:** Non sequiturs can lead to illogical leads. So can the practice of backing into an idea. Look at this flawed example and an improved version:

**Example (flawed):** Hoping to reduce a flood of over-budget spending that has plagued the city government for the first six months of this fiscal year, all five city council members voted last night to add the positions of purchasing agent and a data processing manager to the city payroll.

(Sounds illogical to add jobs to reduce spending, doesn't it?)

**Example (improved):** City council members agreed last night that the city could save money with more professional purchasing practices and more effective use of computers.

Council members voted to hire a purchasing agent and a data processing manager as part of an effort to combat six months of over-

budget spending.

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**Backed-Into Leads:** Some of us are attracted to chronological order. Such an attraction can result in stories that read like the minutes of a meeting. The most interesting stuff may not show up until paragraph 19. With each story you edit, ask yourself: Does the most interesting and important stuff show up in the lead--and do so quickly? If not, fix it.

**Example:**

The city council met last night to discuss creation of two new positions.

After a lengthy discussion, the city council voted 7-0 to create two new positions on the city's administrative staff to deal with purchasing and data processing.

The two positions, purchasing agent and data processing agent, will be filled as soon as possible, Mayor Bonnie Augustine said. She said the city clerk would advertise the positions in accordance to state hiring practices.

The two positions are being created because . . .

(Oh, fourth paragraph and, finally, the news. But this is just an example, and I didn't want to make you read a 10- or 20-paragraph story. Sometimes the real news is buried much deeper into the story. Seek it out, then either have the writer move the news to the top or, if the writer is not available, do it yourself.)