

Writing News Leads

Hard News Leads

1. News summary lead:

Gets readers immediately to the main point of the article. The reader could stop after the lead and know the basic gist of the story.

Example: *Area students now have the opportunity to receive high school credit by using the Internet.*

-Peninsula Outlook, Peninsula HS, Gig Harbor, Wash.

2. Modified news lead/nut graph:

This type of lead uses only one or two of the "who, what, when, where, and how" in the first paragraph, delaying the answers to the others to entice the reader to continue. The nut graph is a paragraph toward the beginning that catches the reader up on the point of the story. It's like a summary lead, only it appears a paragraph or two down, after a more creative lead.

Example: *Growing up playing football in the backyards, going to Memorial Stadium, or listening to Kent Pavelka on the radio or Keith Jackson on ABC, many dreamed of wearing that red "N" on their helmets or being the next Tommie Frazier or Ricky Williams. As people get older, however, those dreams start to fade away.*

On Feb. 3, that dream became a reality for four Southeast football players as seniors Chris Loos, Ty Gifford, Sean Blue, and Brandt Bacus all signed to play football for either Division I or II schools next fall.

-Clarion, Southeast HS, Lincoln, Neb.

Soft News/Feature Leads

3. Vignette:

A brief descriptive sketch or story, designed to bring an issue down to the personal level. It will probably be followed by a nut graph, and the ending of the story may complete the vignette.

Example: *Senior Josh Bartlett gets home from school around 4 p.m. He squeezes in half an hour of homework—some sociology or maybe a little econ. At 7 p.m., after a workout, a shower, and a quick dinner, he is ready to hit the books again, this time for advanced chemistry or calculus. "On a normal night I can do probably about three hours," he said.*

After he has finished his school assignments, Bartlett also has to prepare for a mock trial, model UN and an upcoming engineering competition. If he works straight through, he can be done by 10:30 p.m., but more often he shoots to finish at 11 and be in bed by 11:30. He rarely makes it.

Bartlett is one of thousands of students in the United States being

smothered by homework. According to researchers at the University of Michigan, kids are doing more school work than ever before and at much younger ages. In 1981, grade school students spent 84 minutes a week on homework. In 1997, that figure was up to 134 minutes per week. In 1997, junior high students were pounding out upward of three and a half hours of homework per week, compared to only two hours in 1981.

-Update, H.H. Dow HS, Midland, Mich.

4. Descriptive/Background Lead:

Describes the story's setting using the five senses, or gives background details leading up to the story itself. The focus is on the information surrounding the event, not on the participants.

Example: *Hundreds of thousands of televisions were tuned into the Weather Channel as the announcer spoke of destructive winds and massive waves. Awaiting the next update and hoping for a change in course, vacationers and residents alike wondered if they should leave.*

On Aug. 25 they got their answer.

-Sound to Sea, Manteo HS, Manteo, N.C.

5. Direct Address:

Temporarily speaks directly to the reader by using "you" and a command. After the lead, the body of the story is then written in third person. Although when used sparingly it can be effective in involving the reader in the story, it should not be used often.

Example: *You may have seen Justin Lopez roaming through the halls and wondered, "Should this guy be in college?" It turns out that this 6'6", 235 lb. giant is a sophomore.*

-Horizon, Westwood HS, Austin, Texas

6. Comparison or Contrast Lead:

There are three types: time comparison (then and now; yesterday and today), size comparison (macro to micro; global to home) and cultural comparison (Asian to European; liberal to conservative).

Example (Time comparison): *From the time she was a little girl, Sarah Harvey ('99) has loved flying in commercial jets. A year and a half ago, on her 16th birthday, Harvey sat in the cockpit of a Cessna 150 and began flying herself.*

-Academy Times, Chas. Wright Acad., Tacoma, Wash.

7. Novelty/Oddity Lead:

This is a catch-all category. They are creative leads that likely succeed at attracting readers simply because they are different.

Example: *It's a strange twist on an old classic. The Disney-fied version presents a sweet blond in a dress and apron, but Thursday night at 7:30 the curtain goes up on The Charles Wright Players production of Alice in Wonderland.....in an insane asylum.*

-Academy Times, Chas. Wright Acad., Tacoma, Wash.

8. Direct Quotation Lead:

These leads are used infrequently, and only if the direct quote is brief. Sometimes a partial direct quote may be effective.

Example: *"When I say Colombia, what do you think of?" Pilar Gonzalez asks an intense group of Uni students.*

"Soccer," ventures one. There are a few giggles.

"That's right, what else?" Drugs and coffee are added to the list. Gonzalez is a speaker from the Colombia Support Network, here to speak with the Spanish Club.

-Gargoyle, University HS, Urbana, Ill.

9. Question Lead:

Use sparingly. It can be effective if the question is the crux of the story, because then the article can continue by answering the question that was posed.

Example: *What happens to all of that recycling? Blue bins have been placed in classrooms, and sometimes students remember to put their used paper in them, but when they fill up, what happens to all that stuff?*

-A-Blast, Annandale HS, Annandale, Va.