SUPPLEMENTAL NOTES: Writing News Leads

Definition
A lead is the beginning of a news story. Its purpose is to grab the reader’s attention. It should follow the subject-verb-object sentence structure for clarity. It should not exceed 35 words.

Types
Direct or Summary Lead – This type of lead tells the reader or listener the most important aspect of the story at once. It is usually used on breaking news events.

Make the lead to conform to this structure:

WHO + (did) WHAT + <WHEN> + /WHERE/ + [WHY/HOW/UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS]*

*Where, why and how are news questions that are not always included in the lead but are dealt with in the body of the story. But they may also provide the focus of hard-news leads.

Example:

SPRINGFIELD, Va. – A four-vehicle accident injured 17 people <Sunday> [in a wreck that involved a Canadian tour bus, a truck and two cars, and shut down the Capital Beltway and the heavily traveled I-95 corridor for several hours.]

Summary Lead with Attribution (Pay attention to the use of parallel structure)

Strolling to the bus stop, fidgeting during a meeting, standing up to stretch, jumping off the couch to change channels, and engaging in other minor physical activities can make the difference between being lean and obese, researchers said yesterday.

Delayed-Identification Lead – This is a type of summary lead that is used when the “who” in your lead is not a well-known person in your community or in the nation. Age, location, occupation or another modifier is used in the first paragraph. The person is identified by name in the second paragraph.

Example (Using LOCATION as the identifier):

HARMONY, N.C. – A Pioneer City man is free on bond after sheriff’s deputies found 143 marijuana plants in a storage building behind his Benson Road home. Horace Clancy, 37, was charged Wednesday with possession of drug paraphernalia, possession with intent to deliver, sell and manufacture marijuana and maintaining a dwelling with the intent to sell marijuana.

Impact Lead – This type of lead explains to readers and viewers how they will be affected by an issue. Can be written in summary form or in a delayed (not delayed-ID) form, like a soft lead.

Example:

Homeowners whose roofs were damaged during the recent hurricane have five more days to apply for free repairs provided by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.
Writing Summary Leads

1. Make sure the lead includes the most important of the five W's and H, particularly the “who” (person or thing), (did) what, and when. For a story about a report, never begin with the statement “A report was issued by….”

2. In general, keep the lead to 17-35 words.

3. If the story uses a delayed-identification lead, make sure the lead begins with an identifier (age, location, occupation, or other identifier). Present it in the first paragraph. In the second paragraph, identify the person.

4. For an impact lead, the “who” of the lead will be the persons impacted by news being reported. (For example, “Students who own cars will have to pay more to park on campus.”)

5. To continue the story, to present the rest of the collected facts in order of decreasing importance—as a mixture of quotes (direct and indirect) elaboration, and background.

Soft or Delayed Leads

This lead entices the reader or listener into the story by hinting at its contents in a brief narrative or descriptive form. It is usually used with feature stories or longer news stories with a focus on the human aspect of a news issue. It is almost always followed by a nut graph—a paragraph similar to a summary lead that states the news focus of the story.

Example: (From the Raleigh News & Observer)

WAKE FOREST – Like many of her low-income neighbors in northeast Wake Forest, Armenta Richardson, 55, does not have a car.

Because her neighborhood is not serviced by public transportation, she must ask for a ride when she wants to go to the nearest supermarket several miles away. Richardson could walk to the Dollar General store, which is closer than the supermarket, but that would involve walking on streets without sidewalks.

Her experience has become common among low-income residents in Wake Forest, according to a recent study of the town conducted by a group of graduate students from UNC-Chapel Hill’s School of Public Health.

1. Try to focus on starting with an anecdote, quote or description. Describe a place, a person or a moment that comes out of your reporting.

2. In general, limit soft leads to three to four paragraphs. This includes the nut graph. In special stories, they should extend to no more than five grafs.

3. Check the nut graph (lead). This should be the “lead,” explaining the “news peg” giving the reason the subject is focused on. It should conform to the same structure as a standard summary lead. (However it can be 2 sentences.) The third paragraph in the example above is an example:

   Her experience has become common among low-income residents in Wake Forest, according to a recent study of the town conducted by a group of graduate students from UNC-Chapel Hill’s School of Public Health.

Further discussion, read the following handouts at the course Web site:

- News Question Leads
- Writing Soft Leads