News Writing:  Lead Paragraphs

The most important paragraphs in a news story are the paragraphs that make up what is known as the lead group or the introduction to a news story. Although traditionally a lead was one paragraph, usually one sentence, that summarized the whole story and always contained all of the of the five W’s and the H (the who, where, when, why, what and how) these paragraphs were often awkward to write and sometimes were difficult to read as well. Leads written this way seemed, at times, to have too much information crammed into one sentence to be clearly understood. As a result of these reasons and the changing habits of readers, the way a lead is written has changed.

It is no longer considered necessary to summarize an entire story in the first paragraph (or to include all of the five W’s and the H in the first paragraph). Currently, leads are referred to by many journalists as a lead group since a lead may be one paragraph but more often two or perhaps even more paragraphs, and hence they are usually a group of paragraphs. But a lead group is most often (but not always) the first two paragraphs of a news story. They are also extremely important since they are the first paragraphs that a person reads. Often a person will decide whether or not they will read a story after only scanning part of the first paragraph. As a result, it is very important for a news writer to use a very unique aspect of the most important fact in the news information in the first paragraph and present it in an interesting way with good action verbs. It is felt that (and readership studies have supported this) there is little point to using something unique in the fifth or sixth paragraph if most people will simply stop reading out of boredom before they even get to that point.

The most common type of first paragraph in a news story lead group is one that is still a summary of a news event, but is very brief and often only a deliberately partial summary. This summary lead paragraph which is usually one fairly short sentence which uses most (but not always all) of the five W’s and the H (the who, what, when, where, why and how) of the news event and is usually written in such a way that it tells the reader most of what the story will be about but it also leaves out just enough information so that the reader will be enticed to read the next paragraph to get the entire picture of what the story is about. Sounds easy doesn’t it?
One paragraph made up of one short sentence. The problem that many seem to have with this sentence is that it not only contains a lot of information (perhaps all, but not always all, of the five W's and the H) but it has to be written so interestingly that it really grabs a reader and gets them to read the story. As basic as this may seem, another difficulty that some seem to have in writing leads is that in complicated stories (or even in some stories that are not so complicated) it can sometimes be difficult to determine exactly what the five W's and the H are. There are times when the amount of information seems overwhelming and sometimes confusingly intertwined. How does a news writer see through the tangle of information and pull out something that really grabs the reader's attention and then takes them directly to the main point of the story?

Try asking yourself the questions in this checklist and see if your answers will help you focus on the important elements of your cluster of news facts:

1. What was the main point of the story information?
2. What are the most recent facts?
3. Which facts are the most unique?
4. Which facts have a special local interest?
5. Which specific facts are most likely to impact my readers?
6. Was anything unique said that will take the reader to the main point of the story?

If completing the checklist has given you a clear idea about a main point to your story with an interesting twist, you can start writing your lead. But if you are still not sure about what the most important facts in your news story are after asking yourself the above questions, take a short break and go back over your information. But this time when you go back over your information try distancing yourself from the personal contacts that you may have had when you gathered your information. Persons in news events often think that their views and the things that happened to them are the most important, and that can make evaluating news importance rather cloudy. This can be especially true after interviewing several people with very strong opinions.

In a news story, a reporter has to evaluate the facts objectively, and personalities and personal interests really do have to be pushed to the side. I realize that this is easier said than done, since there are times when news gathering can be rather intense and personal but you really cannot let personalities and egos have an influence over your decisions. So this time, when you
go back over your information, try the following checklist as a way of organizing your news story. I know what you are probably thinking at this point: “Not another checklist?” Don't worry about it, just try it. After you get used to writing leads you won't need these lists. You will do all of this critical thinking automatically. But, at least in the beginning, give the lists a try and see if they don't provide an organized way of making sense out of all your information.

Review the instructions that you received when you got your news assignment. These instructions are important since an instructor or an editor may have told you to stress a certain angle for local interest or some other reason of reader interest. The main point here is that these instructions may directly influence the way you will structure your information. These instructions are also something that are easy to forget when a person is all entangled with lots of facts.

Review the notes you wrote when gathering your news information, but this time make sure that you read every word.

Identify the most important facts in your news information by underlining them.

Type out a few ideas that you feel use the most important facts in a unique way. A technique that works for me at this early point in the writing is that I imagine a future reader of my story. I visualize this potential reader as being impatient, preoccupied, and generally not at all interested in the topic that I am writing about. I then try to think about whether or not there are any facts that can be expressed in such a unique way that even a person who is generally very busy and apathetic will stop and read them. In other words, I need facts that cut right to the heart of the story and do so in an interesting way. There is not time for indirect storytelling here. If interesting facts are not stated quickly at this point, the reader has gone on to something else, or so I visualize.

I hope that these lead writing evaluation tips help. But if you are still stuck and don't have a clue on how to start your lead before you have actually started to type don't panic, start typing. The very physical act of typing can get the thinking going when nothing else will work. Don't ask me how typing helps a writer to think more clearly, I only know that it works. And it
really doesn't matter if what you start to write seems to be good at this point or not.

As a matter of fact, the first few sentences usually are not very good, since they are really ideas that are warming you up to some pretty good ideas that are bound to come. The main thing here is that you just need to have confidence that some very good ideas are going to come out of all of your typing and the ideas will come. Just keep typing short sentences that contain as many of the five W's and the H as you can fit in. I sometimes make a game out of writing a lead sentence at this point by trying to see just how I can tweak a sentence so that it will contain the missing W or the H that I feel is important. And remember, as you type, that you are trying to think of a creative twist to what might seem, at first glance, to be just a rather ordinary group of news facts.

At this point a few examples of lead paragraphs should be helpful. The first example is from a story that I had a class of student journalists cover. The story assignment was to cover a speaker in L-14 who spoke on organ donation. The speaker spoke for a full hour and covered so much information that a number of the students really had a difficult time sifting through all of the facts and starting a lead.

It was my feeling that one of the speaker's statements about "never being too old" could be used in a two paragraph lead group to create reader attention. You should also notice that the first paragraph is one short sentence and deliberately does not explain what a person may be never too old for. It is my intention that the reader will be enticed into reading the next paragraph to get the answer to this question.

There is at least one thing in life that a person is never too old for, an audience of teachers and students were told Monday morning.

But doesn't too old for anything seem just too good to be true? Not according to Fred Berry, president of the National Organ Society, a person can donate their organs at any age. Berry, speaking in the Liberal Arts Building at the HFCC main campus, explained many of the facts and dispelled many of the myths of organ donation.

Another example that I think will be informative is from a story that I assigned to first semester journalism students. Their assignment was to cover the dedication and grand opening of the HFCC Student and Culinary Arts Center. This event involved listening to several speakers
and going through the new facility on a guided tour. The lead that I wrote, as an example for the class, involved a play off of a quote from one of the student speakers who stated that the new center's diversity in new food selections will reflect HFCC's diversity of students. As in the first example, I was trying to find a twist to the facts of the story that would create reader interest and not just be an ordinary dedication story containing a listing of speakers followed by brief summaries.

Diversity can be flavorful and intriguingly delicious students and guests were told at the dedication and grand opening of the new Student and Culinary Arts Center Monday morning at the HFCC main campus.

This lead directly introduces the reader to the main point of the story, which was the dedication and opening of a new facility, and is designed to entice the reader to read the second paragraph in a similar manner of the first example. That is, by deliberately not giving the reader all of the information in the first paragraph, I am hoping that the reader will be inquisitive enough to want to know just what is meant by stating that diversity can be flavorful and delicious to be motivated to keep reading. The second paragraph will have to contain the name and title of the speaker of the paraphrased quote as well as a few specific details about the dedication program. A few well described examples of the diversity in food selections will also have to be described fairly early in the story.

Both of the lead examples that I have given you so far involved not giving the reader all of the information in the first paragraph. When you take this approach you have to remember that the reader will expect the answers to the questions that you raise by withholding information very quickly. Just remember that you are trying to create reader interests; you are not writing a mystery story. Another thing to remember about the first two examples is that the interest that they create takes the reader right to the main point of the stories. Also, in these two cases, the reader would feel cheated if there turned out not to be something that a person is too old for or no logical flavor or deliciousness to diversity.

The last lead example is from an assignment that a student journalist received while working on an assignment. At the time of this assignment there was a lot of talk about the need for stricter gun control laws in Michigan. The student was asked to get the views of a local gun
store manager about the current legislative proposals. The student got the interview with the store manager and predictably returned from the interview with the responses that one would expect.

The manager was very forcefully against anything that would restrict gun sales. The problem with writing a lead for a story like this is that there did not seem to be anything that was new about the information. A paragraph starting out with a statement that a gun store manager is against gun control was far too predictable to be interesting to most readers and this student knew that. So what does a person do with information that seems far too ordinary to be appealing?

Do you remember one of the steps in the checklists that I gave you about going back over your notes? The student went back over his information and buried in between lots of very strongly worded quotes about being against any type of gun control laws was a quote, believe it or not, that this manager did not have any guns at home because he thought that they were too dangerous to be around his young children. This information seems so obviously unusual that it seem incredible that this student missed it, but, in fact, he did.

This is the lead that this student finally wrote, but this is not the name of the store manager and in the place of the ellipses would be the name and the location of the store (that I am not going to state):

How can a manager of a local gun store sell guns to parents when he will not allow them inside of his own house?

"I let people make up their own minds. If they want guns then I'll sell them what they want," said Bill Smith, manager of ....

"I don't want my kids around these things, but if other people want their kids around guns then its up to them."

Also, notice how the student followed his question with a quote from the store manager. The quote explains part of the answer to the question in the first sentence but purposefully does not explain everything.

The reader will have to read the third paragraph to get most of the information that they will need to understand the facts of this story.
I hope that these examples and brief explanations have given you some good ideas for the writing of leads. Remember that one of the most important things to do before you start writing your lead is to organize your information so that the most important facts described with good action verbs (with an interestingly creative twist) will be in your first sentence. Writing a story that has an approach that makes it unique from the stories that everyone else is writing is the goal.

As a conclusion, I thought that a description of the contents of a three sentence lead group would be helpful. If the information in this lead group fits the most common pattern of news facts (and I am assuming that it does for the purposes of this handout), the first sentence would probably be the first paragraph. The next two sentences would directly support the first sentence by immediately stating specific facts that were deliberately not given in the first sentence to create reader curiosity. These two sentences would also probably constitute the second paragraph.

Summary of lead writing tips for a three sentence lead group:

1. Find an interesting twist to the facts in your story.
2. Write a first sentence that captures that interesting twist to the main point of the story, but deliberately leaves something out (one of the four W's or the H) so that the reader will want to keep reading to find out what is missing.
3. Write a second sentence that gives the reader some of the information not given in the first sentence, but also deliberately leaves out on of the four W's or the H so that the reader will be curious enough to keep reading to find out what is missing.
4. Write a third sentence that gives the reader the last of the important elements of the of the four W's or the H.