**The Ultimate ALPHA Guide to Writing News Story Leads**

Below are a dozen different ways you can begin your story. There are also interactive exercises to practice your lead- writing skills.   
\_\_\_Remember: A lead sets the tone and mood for the rest of your story, so choose carefully. Depending on what you're writing about, certain leads may be more appropriate than others.  
\_\_\_If none of the leads mentioned in the video or listed below seem like a good fit, try coming up with your own approach. Just make sure that your lead gets to the point quickly and entices the reader to read on.

**Summary Lead**

\_\_\_The summary lead is the most traditional lead in a journalism article. It is to the point and factual. It's meant to give a reader a quick summary of the story in as few words as possible (should be 30 words or less), usually in one sentence. It contains the essence of the story (i.e. the most important, but not necessarily all, of the 5 Ws and H -- who, what, when, where, why and how). It cites the source of any opinions.   
\_\_\_For example, I frequently used this approach when I covered breaking news for a wire service:

*\_\_WASHINGTON -- Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan told Congress yesterday that U.S. economic growth appeared to be slowing, heading off for the moment any need to raise interest rates. Wall Street responded with a cheer, sending stocks and bonds soaring.*

**Single-Item Lead**

\_\_\_This lead focuses on just one or two elements of a summary lead for a bigger punch. For instance, when the Philadelphia Phillies won the 2008 World Series, their first championship since 1980, a story posted online by the Associated Press began with this single-item lead:

*\_\_The Philadelphia Phillies are World Champions again.*

\_\_\_As opposed to this typical summary lead, which Reuters used:

*\_\_The Philadelphia Phillies ended their long wait for a World Series title with a short burst of baseball last night as they clinched the crown by completing a rain-suspended 4-3 win over the Tampa Bay Rays.*

**Delayed Identification Lead**

\_\_\_Sometimes with summary leads, you don't always want to clearly identify the subject (or the who) right away. In the above examples, the who -- Alan Greenspan and the Phillies -- were identified because they were really essential elements of the story. People don't just want to hear that a baseball team won a championship -- they want to know which team. Similarly, when the Federal Reserve chairman speaks, people listen.  
\_\_\_Often, however, the subject doesn't have much name recognition, nor do readers care all that much about the subject's name. So, use a descriptive pronoun to identify the person in the lead. Provide his specific name and title in a later paragraph.  
\_\_\_For example, take this lead I wrote about a school board scuffle for the Providence Journal. Few people can name the members of their local school board, so I didn't include their names in the lead. What made this story newsworthy was the what (the fight). So, I lead with details about that and identified names in a later paragraph:

*\_\_LINCOLN, R.I. -- A School Committee member has filed an assault complaint against a fellow member, accusing her of grabbing her nose and twisting it following an executive session Thursday night.  
\_\_Patricia A. Iannelli yesterday alleged in an interview that fellow committee member Lucille J. Mandeville "grabbed my nose and proceeded to twist my nose" following a rancorous discussion during a closed-door School Committee meeting.*

**Creative Lead**

\_\_\_Unless you're writing hard news for a daily newspaper or regularly-updated website, the summary lead just doesn't reel in readers. You need to take a more creative approach. Consider this summary lead:

*\_\_A late spring snowstorm surprised forecasters and drivers Tuesday afternoon, triggering more than 30 accidents, Cleveland police officials said.*

\_\_\_Instead, you could try a more creative approach, such as the example immediately below.

**Short Sentence Lead**

\_\_\_This lead uses one word or a short phrase as a teaser for the rest of the lead. Readers may find this gimmicky, so use this approach sparingly. Here's an example:

*\_\_One-fifth of an inch.  
\_\_That's all the snow it took to trigger more than 30 accidents on local roads yesterday as a late spring storm snuck up on Cleveland motorists.*

**Analogy Lead**

\_\_\_This lead makes a comparison between an issue or event you're writing about and something more familiar to the average reader. This approach can work well when you have a complex or foreign matter you want to explain in laymen's terms. Consider:

*\_\_AMSTERDAM -- The Netherlands is considering anti-terrorism laws that make the United States' Patriot Act look like a civil libertarian's dream come true.*

**Wordplay Lead**

\_\_\_This lead involves a clever turn of phrase, name or word. Be careful using this lead because it can mislead the reader. The reader may think your story is about one thing and then discover it's about something else and get annoyed.  
\_\_\_ But I think a wordplay lead approach works for this next example, excerpted from a story I wrote about a fire at a costume store. Because the fire happened late at night, it didn't get newspaper coverage until two days later, at which point it wasn't breaking news and a summary lead wouldn't have worked well.

*\_\_PAWTUCKET, R.I. -- Bill Clinton will finally get taken to the cleaners.  
\_\_So will Dracula and a Playboy bunny.  
\_\_The three are among some 6,000 smoke-damaged costumes that will visit dry cleaners in the next few days, because of a fire that broke out Wednesday night at Morris Novelty, a popular costume and novelty store.*

**Scenic Lead**

\_\_\_This lead begins with a description of the scene surrounding an event. It is typically used for stories in which the setting is prominent, such as stories about festive events, performances and sports. It can also be used to strike a mood appropriate for the story.  
\_\_\_One of my students used such an approach for her profile story, which was published in the Asbury Park Press -- and it worked well. As the youngest member of a prestigious ballet group, her subject's typical work day is atypical for an 18-year-old. So, she began her story by describing a scene from the teenage ballerina's work day.

*\_\_The lights shine down and the music surrounds her as she spins across the stage into the arms of her partner. The audience roars its approval as the music slows and the curtains begin to close.  
\_\_It's the end of just another workday for teenager Chelsea Rittenhouse.  
\_\_At 18, the Howell resident is the youngest member of the New York Theater Ballet, which describes itself as the most widely seen chamber ballet company in the United States. The professional group also tours abroad.*

**Storytelling Lead**

\_\_\_Using a narrative style, begin by introducing the main characters, the conflict, and perhaps the setting of the story. Make readers feel the drama and want to know what's going to happen next. Wall Street Journal reporter Angelo Henderson used this approach to begin his Pulitzer Prize-winning article about a pharmacist who is driven to violence by his encounters with armed robbery:

*\_\_DETROIT -- "Get on the ground," a man holding a gun screamed. "I'll blow your heads off if you move."  
\_\_Dennis Grehl and a co-worker complied. Dreamlike, he found himself lying face down on a cold, gritty black-tile floor, a pistol against the back of his head.  
\_\_"Please, mister, don't make me shoot you," a second gunman threatened.  
\_\_A crazy memory: tiny specks of light floating in the tile; that, and the paralyzing weight of helplessness.   
\_\_Mr. Grehl is a pharmacist, unassuming, mild mannered. A family man with a wife and a daughter.  
\_\_He was being robbed.*

**Amazing Fact Lead**

\_\_\_Open with an amazing fact that arouses readers interest, such as:

*\_\_WASHINGTON -- Sixty percent of Americans oppose the U.S. war in Iraq, the highest number since polling on the subject began with the commencement of the war in March 2003, according to poll results and trends released Wednesday. (CNN)*

**Startling Statement Lead**

\_\_\_Open with a startling statement that arouses reader interest. When I was assigned to write an anniversary story about a widely-publicized murder, I knew I'd need a unique angle if I was going to get people to read about someone whom they'd already heard a lot about. So, I began my story with a startling statement:

*\_\_LINCOLN, R.I. -- The first thing Elizabeth Moon sees in the morning is the room where her father was beaten to death.  
\_\_It was one year ago yesterday that she and this bucolic town were stunned by the brutal and still unsolved murder of Dr. Alfred C. Moon. The radiologist's naked body was found in his bed, bludgeoned with a lamp.  
\_\_According to an autopsy report, the medical pioneer who brought the CAT scan to Rhode Island died from "blunt force deforming-type trauma" so severe that he had to be identified by dental records.  
\_\_Elizabeth Moon acknowledges that many people think it's "creepy" that her family lives in the house where it happened. To her, the light gray house with aqua shutters on Briarwood Road is not where her father died, but the place where he lived.*

**Opposite Lead**

\_\_\_Cite first one point of view or observation and then follow with the opposite view, like this:

*\_\_Facebook rots the brain, according to a report by a Stansbury University psychology professor. Jim Wallace, honors student and an avid user of the popular website, says that just isn't true.*

**List Lead**

\_\_\_Sometimes instead of focusing on just one person, place or thing, you want to impress the reader with a longer list. Consider this next example, which comes from a story I wrote for the Arizona Republic about the growing popularity of general aviation in Phoenix. Because of the diversity of examples, many readers probably can identify with at least one of the pilots:

*\_\_Whenever sixth-grader Vasil Evanoff has a day off from school, he hops into a Cessna 152 and takes to the skies.  
\_\_On weekends, Sue Sumner likes to fly her grandson around the Valley, just to see the sights.  
\_\_There's a special restaurant that funeral director Lincoln Ragsdale Jr. likes to visit for breakfast, but it's 115 miles away from home. He climbs in his Beech Bonanza A-36, and an hour later, he's eating pancakes in Sedona.  
\_\_Evanoff, Sumner and Ragsdale are among the growing numbers of Arizonans piloting small airplanes.*

Source: http://cubreporters.org/leads.html