

Writing For Media

Week 2

The Inverted Pyramid /
Summary Leads

Introduction

- Reporters are the eyes and ears of their audiences.
- When reporters cover a breaking news event, their first stories summarise what happened, to whom, where, when, why and how.
- Reporters are there to gather the essential facts and write their stories as quickly and as near their deadlines as possible.
- Such hard news stories usually begin with a *summary lead*.
- ***Summary lead*** is a terse opening paragraph that provides the gist of the story and invites readers inside. It should be brief, generally no more than 35 words.

- Summary leads are used in news stories because they give the major point immediately.
- That way, people do not have to guess or wait to find out the news.
- Most people do not have time to read a newspaper from start to end due to time constraints, therefore they demand the most important points at the start of the story.

Principles of Summary Leads (The Inverted Pyramid)

- A summary lead generally tops a traditional form of writing called an ***inverted pyramid***, in which the news is stacked in paragraphs (para) in order of descending importance.
- The lead summarises the principal items of a news event.
- The second para and each succeeding para contain secondary or supporting details in order of decreasing significance.
- All paras contain newsworthy information, but each para is less vital than the one before it.

- Inverted-pyramid form puts the climax of a story at the beginning, in the lead, and so it is different from a form used for novels, short stories and drama—and even for some news features—in which an author begins with background and work to a climax.
- Newspapers had adopted the inverted-pyramid form because it capsulises the news quickly.
- It let readers grasp the news of the day conveniently by simply skimming lead paras.

The Five W's and H (5W1H)

- A summary lead tells an audience the most important of the six primary elements of an event – the **five W's and H**. They are:
 - *Who* the event happened to, or who acted on whom
 - *What* happened or will happen
 - *Where* the action occurred
 - *When* it happened
 - *Why* the action took place; the reason behind it
 - *How* it happened

- Reporters look for these six elements whenever they cover a news event regardless of how big or small the story is.
- Reporters gather the facts to answer *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how*; they rate the importance of each fact; then they are ready to write a lead and news story.
- The most important of the six elements go into the summary lead.
- The less important elements go into the second and succeeding paras.
- In most cases, it would take too many words to try to put all six elements into one lead para.

Rating the W's and H

- After the five W's and H are identified, they must be rated according to their importance. This is not always easy for beginning reporters but here are three principles that will help:
- *Conduct Research*: If possible, do not cover a news event without researching the subject and the people involved. That will make it easier to spot the freshest news, key issues, etc.
- *Try to Identify the 5Ws and H during the Reporting Process*: A news story is based on the 6 elements; look and listen for them.
- *Talk to Editors*: They will often say what direction they want a story to take.

The Thought Process Behind The Lead

- Reporters say the same thing about news writing: while they are interviewing a source, covering a speech or working at the scene of a traffic accident, they are thinking about their leads and stories.
- Several factors can influence how a reporter thinks about a story:
- *What has been reported in the past.* reporters are always looking for something new.
- *How the Reporter Feels about the Subject.* Reporters bring their own prejudices and emotions to every story they cover.

- *How the Audience Feels about the Subject.* Reporters must know this. They will want to keep their readers, viewers or listeners informed on the latest developments.
- *Instructions from an Editor.* The reporter will probably concentrate on the issue based on the editor's advice.
- In the newsroom, the reporter has to decide how many of the W's and H can be put into the lead while still keeping it brief and easy to understand.

Multiple-Element Summary Leads

- ***Multiple-element lead*** or ***double-barreled lead*** are lead that gives two or more of the primary elements of a news story equal rating and informs an audience that more than one major event is occurring.
- **Example:**
TERRE HAUTE, Ind.—Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh met with one of his lawyers Thursday about his chances of avoiding execution, even as prison officials moved full speed ahead to carry out the death sentence in five days. (Reuters)
- This 35-word lead summarised the news event. It answered the Ws:

- *Who.* Timothy McVeigh, lawyer, prison officials.
- *What.* Met about avoiding execution, moved full speed ahead.
- *Where.* Terre Haute, Ind.
- *When.* Thursday.
- *Why.* Not much time is left. Everything must be done quickly.

- The lead informed readers that up until the last moment, McVeigh and his lawyers as well as prison officials would be working feverishly. Each one of the elements could have opened the story, but each one was equally important hence warranting a multiple-element lead.

Summary Leads on Features

- Summary leads can also be used on *feature* stories.
- A **feature**—an umbrella term for a variety of stories written on soft news events—is usually not structured as an inverted pyramid, and writers will often top it with a special lead. A feature is a story that analyses the news; entertains; or describes people, places or things in or out of the news.
- Feature writers design their lead to invite readers into their stories, not to report breaking news. Thus the most important of the 5Ws and H do not have to appear in a feature lead. They can be reported somewhere else in the story.

- A feature lead can be narrative, a contrast or a question.
- It may talk directly to the reader or be written in the first person. Or it may summarise the thrust of the story.
- The point is that feature writers can use many types of leads; the summary is one of their options.

(Features will be covered in a later lecture)

Writing a Summary Lead

- A summary lead, which is generally written as a single sentence, should contain no more than 35 words.
- The longer the lead, the greater the risk that it will be difficult to read or understand.
- The general rule to follow when writing a summary lead: *Use a single sentence of no more than 35 words to summarise an event.*

Avoid Clutter Leads

- It's tough to cram the 5Ws and H into a 35-word sentence.
- Why try?
- Doing so makes for an awkward and difficult-to-understand summary lead, which means lost readers and howling editors.
- General guideline to follow: *Put the most important elements in the lead. Do not clutter it with all of them. Save the remaining elements for later paras.*
- Following this guideline will help avoid a **clutter lead**.

Avoid Buried Leads

- If the most important element of a news story is not in the summary lead, the writer has probably ***buried*** it in another para, which means that readers have to hunt for the news. This is not good.
- A summary lead should provide the key points immediately; it should not keep readers guessing.

Determining the Focal Point

- A reporter focuses a summary lead by choosing which of the Ws and H to emphasize.
- Generally the reporters covering a news event decide which of the elements are most important.
- Sometimes most of the elements can be put into the lead; at other times only one or two may be appropriate.

Positioning the Time Element

- The **time** element, the *when* of the story, is an important part of most summary leads because it conveys immediacy to the reader.
- It needs to be placed so that it does not disturb the flow of the sentence and is generally included in the lead para.

Writing in the Active Voice

- Whenever possible, write summary leads (or any other paras) in the active voice rather than the passive voice.
- In the active voice the subject acts upon an object; in the passive voice the subject is acted upon.
- Example of active voice: Jack (*subject*) kicked the ball (*object*).
- Example of passive voice: The ball (*object*) is kicked by Jack (*subject*).
- The passive voice should be used only when the person or thing receiving the action is more important than the person or thing doing the acting.

- Example of use of the passive voice which is permitted:

Five Northwestern students were arrested (**the 5 students is the reason for the news**) Thursday at Scott Hall as more than 70 people protested recruiting on campus by the CIA.

(The Daily Northwestern, Northwestern University)

- Writing in the active voice does not mean that the stories should be written in the present tense. Because news generally describe events that have already occurred, the sentence should be written in the past tense. Voice and tenses are two different things and should not be confused.