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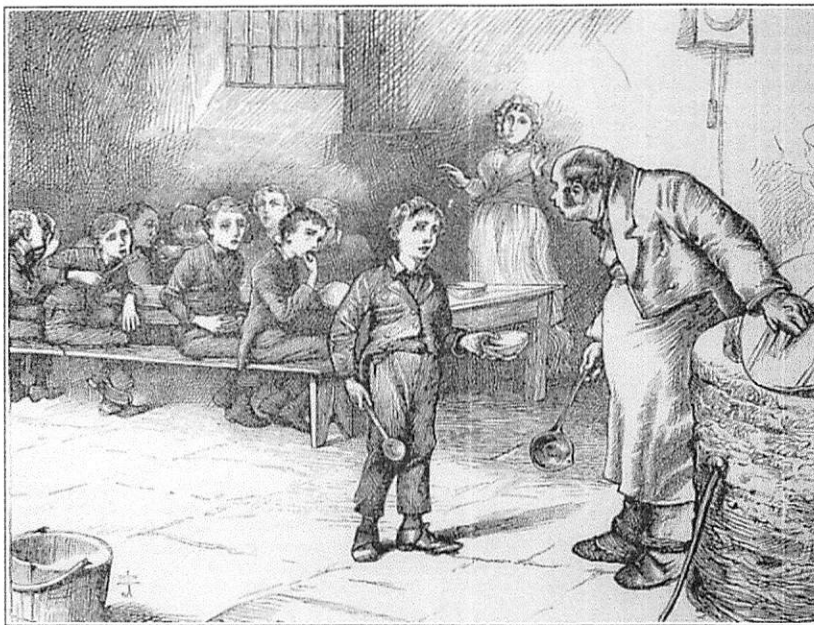
NEWS & VIEWS

# Writing basics: how to write a lead

BY MICHELLE V. RAFTER ON FEBRUARY 20, 2013 · 7 RESPONSES

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The lead is one of the basic building blocks of writing, and now more than ever, freelancers need to know how to write a lead if they want to land work.

A lead is your first chance to hook someone into clicking through and reading your entire story. If you're writing for websites, the lead might be the only part of your story that shows up on the front page, other than the headline, so it's got to be good enough to entice readers to want more.

In fact, that's the perfect definition of a lead - a snippet of information that turns readers into Oliver Twist, asking for more.

A well-crafted lead isn't that different from the opening line of a story query, so master one and you'll most certainly do well at the other.

A story's lead can impart information, set a tone, answer questions and hint at what's to come. But they're not all alike.

There are different types of leads for different types of stories. Here are some of the most common:

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# 1. The News Lead

Also known as the 5 Ws lead or the straight news lead, this is the classic opening to a news story, the one they teach you first in journalism school. In it, you summarize the main aspects of an event, whether you're covering a robbery, basketball game, pope's resignation or results of a presidential election. The news lead shares information by answering the following:

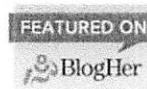
- Who
- What
- Where
- When
- Why
- How (sometimes)

In some cases, fitting all of that information into the lead would result in a sentence that's so long or convoluted you'd lose your readers. In those cases, include the most important of the Ws in the lead sentence and add the rest to a follow up.

Here's an examples of a straight news lead for a tech story on OregonLive.com, the website of the *Oregonian*, my hometown paper. The lead covers who (Facebook), what (donates \$182,000), where (Crook County, a county in central Oregon where the social network operates a big data center), and when (today, Feb. 20, 2013). It doesn't include why - the reasons were complicated enough that the writer devoted the second and third paragraphs to explain them. The lead also doesn't cover how, which given the subject is a donation and Facebook probably wrote a check and gave it to the county, is a minor detail compared to the others:



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# 2. The Second-Day Lead

Reporters who work a beat or freelancers who write about certain topics on a regular basis often find themselves writing multiple stories about a single event. Think about a fire, an election, a bill slowly working its way through the legislative process. You don't need a straight news lead for every story on a subject that readers are somewhat familiar with. In those cases, what I call a second-day lead works better. A second-day lead assumes that readers already know the basics of a story, and you're filling in the newest details. If you're doing any type of writing for websites that are updated multiple times a day, you're already familiar with second-day leads — or in this case, second-hour

leads — since you're probably writing them all the time.

Here's an example of NBCNews.com's second-day lead on a story about a Kansas City, Mo., restaurant fire. The fire was first reported yesterday, so the lead for today's report shares the most important updates since then, namely that the body of one of the missing workers was found in the wreckage:

## Body pulled from wreckage of KC restaurant destroyed in gas explosion



Crews work near the smoldering remains at the scene of an explosion in Kansas City, Mo., on Feb. 20.

By Matthew DeLuca, Staff Writer, NBC News

Authorities pulled a body Wednesday from the wreckage of a landmark restaurant in Kansas City, Mo., where a natural gas explosion caused a spectacular fire.

At least 14 people were injured Tuesday night when a blaze tore through JJ's Restaurant, part of an upscale business and shopping district. Searchers with cadaver dogs had sifted through the rubble for hours overnight looking for the lone person missing, a woman who worked at the restaurant.



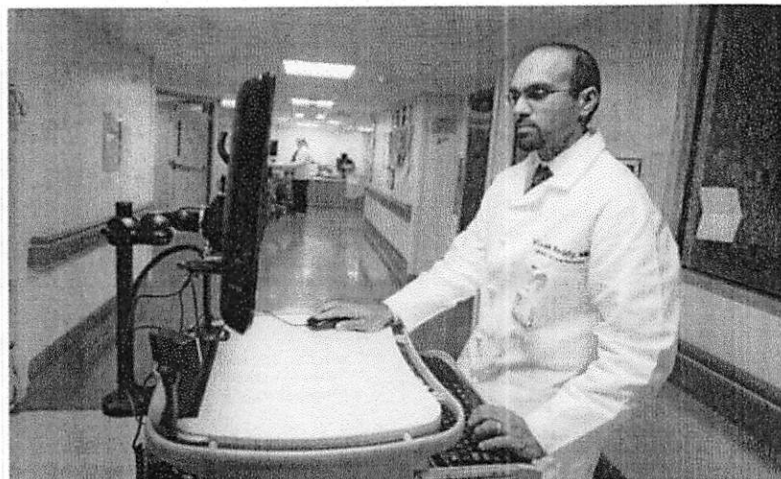
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### 3. The Hook Lead

Unlike a straight news lead with its 5 Ws neatly accounted for, a hook lead tosses out one or two key details in order to "hook" readers so they want to know more. Often times, hook leads are purposely vague or mysterious, leaving out essential facts that can only be obtained upon further investigation.

Here's an example of a hook lead on a Feb. 19, 2013, *New York Times* story about medical records technology legislation that's helped some companies get rich. The lead alludes to a \$19 billion government "giveaway" but doesn't say exactly what that giveaway is until much deeper, where it's revealed that the medical records industry got \$19 billion in federal and state investments for shifting to electronic record keeping:

## A Digital Shift on Health Data Swells Profits in an Industry



Jeff Sisson for The New York Times

Dr. Vivek Reddy, a neurologist at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, also works on its digital records effort.

By JULIE CRESWELL

Published: February 19, 2013 | 407 Comments

It was a tantalizing pitch: come get a piece of a \$19 billion government "giveaway."

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The approach came in 2009, in a presentation to doctors by [Allscripts Healthcare Solutions](#) of Chicago, a well-connected player in the lucrative business of digital medical records.

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## 4. The Feature Lead

When it comes to leads for feature stories, the only rule is that there are no rules. Feature stories are typically more free form than news stories, so it follows that feature leads are more free form too. One freelance editor I know suggests that writers include in their stories the most strange, bizarre, quirky thing they discovered in their reporting. You could use the same trick for a feature lead.

Here's a feature lead from "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," Gay Talese's 1966 *Esquire Magazine* profile of the actor and singer often held out as one of the best examples of new journalism. In this case, the lead builds, sharing details of where the singer is, who he's with and what he's doing, with everything building up to the critical last sentence of the second paragraph:

many of the people around Sinatra - his friends, his associates, his family, his countless hangers-on -- and observing the man himself wherever he could. The result, "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," ran in April 1966 and became one of the most celebrated magazine stories ever published, a pioneering example of what came to be called New Journalism -- a work of rigorously faithful fact enlivened with the kind of vivid storytelling that had previously been reserved for fiction. The piece conjures a deeply rich portrait of one of the era's most guarded figures and tells a larger story about entertainment, celebrity, and America itself. We're very pleased to republish it here.

[Click here to read the six other greatest Esquire stories ever published -- in their entirety.](#)

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**Frank Sinatra Has a Cold**

By Gay Talese

**FRANK SINATRA**, holding a glass of bourbon in one hand and a cigarette in the other, stood in a dark corner of the bar between two attractive but fading blondes who sat waiting for him to say something. But he said nothing; he had been silent during much of the evening, except now in this private club in Beverly Hills he seemed even more distant, staring out through the smoke and semidarkness into a large room beyond the bar where dozens of young couples sat huddled around small tables or twisted in the center of the floor to the clamorous clang of folk-rock music blaring from the stereo. The two blondes knew, as did Sinatra's four male friends who stood nearby, that it was a bad idea to force conversation upon him when he was in this mood of sullen silence, a mood that had hardly been uncommon during this first week of November, a month before his fiftieth birthday.

Sinatra had been working in a film that he now disliked, could not wait to finish; he was tired of all the publicity attached to his dating the twenty-year-old Mia Farrow, who was not in sight tonight; he was angry that a CBS television documentary of his life, to be shown in two weeks, was reportedly prying into his privacy, even speculating on his possible friendship with Mafia leaders; he was worried about his starring role in an hour-long NBC show entitled *Sinatra -- A Man and His Music*, which would require that he sing eighteen songs with a voice that at this particular moment, just a few nights before the taping was to begin, was weak and sore and uncertain. Sinatra was ill. He was the victim of an ailment so common that most people would consider it trivial. But when it gets to Sinatra it can plunge him into a state of anguish, deep depression, panic, even rage. Frank Sinatra had a cold.

## 5. The Explanatory Lead

The explanatory lead is like the preface or introduction in a book. It sets the scene without immediately jumping into the heart of the matter. I also call this *The New Yorker* lead because the magazine regularly publishes feature stories and profiles that run 10,000 words or longer, and when you're writing stories of that length, you can afford to take 1,000 words to meander toward what the story is about. Explanatory leads are the opposite of straight news leads: they don't get to the point. In fact, that's part of the draw of an explanatory lead -- you may not know where you're doing, but you're enjoying the ride.

True to form, *New Yorker* editor David Remnick's July 2012 profile of Bruce Springsteen, "We Are Alive," opens close to 50 years ago when the singer was just starting out:

PROFILE

**WE ARE ALIVE**

Bruce Springsteen at sixty-two.

BY DAVID REMNICK

JULY 30, 2012



Springsteen wants his audience to leave the arena, as he commands them with "your back hurting, your voice sore, and your sexual organs stimulated." Photograph by Julian Broad.

Nearly half a century ago, when Elvis Presley was filming "Harum Scarum" and "Help!" was on the charts, a moody, father-haunted, yet uncannily charismatic Shore rat named Bruce Springsteen was building a small reputation around central Jersey as a guitar player in a

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## 6. The Anecdotal Lead

Everybody loves a good yarn. Sometimes the best way to explain a complicated or esoteric topic is with an anecdote or example. The anecdotal lead can also give readers a visual to hang onto so they're not lost once you start explaining what the story is about. And if you save a few details for later, you'll have them reading on to find out more. The *Wall Street Journal* is a huge proponent of the anecdotal lead; there's no better way to teach yourself how they're done than to study some *Journal* back issues.

An anecdotal lead is a good way to open a feature story, but you don't need to reserve it for longer pieces. Here's an example of an anecdotal lead on a 750-word story I wrote for MSN Money on new social networks teenagers are flocking to instead of Facebook. In the lead, I shared the story of my 14-year-old niece, who's a perfect fit for the Instagram- and Snapchat-using teenagers I wrote about in the piece:

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## Smart Spending

### Teens say 'later' to Facebook, shift to photo chats


The youngest smartphone users are moving to new social apps like Snapchat that can be harder to track.

By MSN Money partner 1 hour ago

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This post comes from MSN Money contributor Michelle V. Rafter.

My 14-year-old niece Jennie got her first smartphone in December, so she can -- finally -- send texts and goof around online with the rest of her eighth-grade buddies.



But you'll never see Jennie and her BFFs on Facebook. They don't even have accounts. They'd rather swap silly pictures and texts using smartphone apps like Instagram and Snapchat.

As kids go online at younger ages and use smartphones to do it, they're choosing to spend their time with apps built specifically for mobile devices over other more well-established, Web-centric social networks. That's bad news for Facebook, which not that long ago was the upstart network that knocked off MySpace as the place where the cool kids hung out.

## 7. The Set Up Lead

When you write a Q&A, infographic, chart, listicle or blog post listing a bunch of different things, the lead may also serve as a set up for what follows. The key is to pack as much information in as possible, while providing for a smooth transition to whatever comes next.

Here's an example of a set up lead for a 500-word Q&A I did for *Workforce Management*, the HR trade magazine, with a Yale University Press editor who'd just written a book on what beekeeping had taught him about management. Because the piece was really short, the lead had to introduce him, the book, topics covered in the Q&A, and me. In this case, the lead and introductory paragraph are one and the same:

FEATURED ARTICLE

# The Hive Mind at Work

When Michael O'Malley discusses the hive mind, he's not speaking figuratively. A social psychologist, Yale University Press editor and longtime beekeeper, O'Malley applied his apian knowledge to management practices in *The Wisdom of Bees: What the Hive Can Teach Business About Leadership, Efficiency, and Growth*.

By Michelle Rafter Published: May 13, 2010 Updated: September 7, 2011 Recommended (3) Comments (0)

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When Michael O'Malley discusses the hive mind, he's not speaking figuratively. A social psychologist, Yale University Press editor and longtime beekeeper, O'Malley applied his apian knowledge to management practices in *The Wisdom of Bees: What the Hive Can Teach Business About Leadership, Efficiency, and Growth*. O'Malley spoke recently with *Workforce Management* contributing editor Michelle V. Rafter about the book.

**Workforce Management:** A lot of the book pertains to bees' labor practices. What can HR managers learn from studying how they work?



**Michael O'Malley:** Beehives foster lifelong development in their workforce, so average tenure and productivity are as high as possible.

**WM:** Hives have very high bee retention rates, what can companies learn from that to better train and hang on to employees?

Did I leave any types of leads out? If so, let me know and I'll add them to the list.

[Flickr image by El Bibliomata]

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## 7 responses to "Writing basics: how to write a lead"



**Julie Dodd Thomas** February 20, 2013 at 3:27 pm | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

Michelle this information was very timely and helpful to me. Thanks for sharing it. Julie



**Michelle V. Rafter** February 20, 2013 at 3:44 pm | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)