Leads and nutgraphs

The phone call devastated Spc. Joe Sanders’ world, crumbling to dust his hopes and dreams for the future. Several days elapsed, days filled with the mind-numbing grief that followed the end of a once-loving marriage. He felt helpless. Thousands of miles away, deployed to Iraq, there was little he could do. He somehow got through those days, unthinkingly making the motions because his mind was elsewhere.

To rid himself of the physical memories, Sanders placed the items his wife had sent in a box, each gift, each letter summoning a memory that magnified his loss. The wedding ring was the last to go. As he twisted it off his finger, something snapped inside. What snapped? It’s hard to define. Perhaps he was overwhelmed by the mistaken belief that his burdens had become insurmountable, that life was no longer worth living. In that instant he made an irrevocable decision. Grabbing his rifle, Sanders placed the muzzle against his throat and pulled the trigger.

Did this get your attention? If you are like most readers, a short story like this one used as an introduction grabbed your interest and made you want to read more.

In this lecture you will learn the importance of writing well crafted feature leads. After you learn how to get your readers’ attention, you will also learn how to keep their attention and show them the point of your story by writing focused nutgraphs.
Function of leads

First let’s take a look at what a lead is and what its functions are. A lead is the first sentence or the first few sentences of a story. Unlike summary news leads you wrote earlier, feature leads can be multiple sentences.

They can even be multiple paragraphs. However, you must be careful not to write a lead so long it becomes tedious to the reader. Try to get to the point quickly.

Here are a few things a lead does:

- It grabs readers’ attention and starts the flow of energy.
- It introduces the topic.
- A lead sets the tone of the feature.
- It establishes the point of view.

In the introductory example we used, written by Kim Reischling, an Army command information chief at Fort Polk, La., readers get a glimpse at the specific moment a soldier decided to take his life. In addition to grabbing the readers’ attention, she also hints at the story’s topic. From the beginning, we understand this story is serious in nature. Finally, the author uses a third-person point of view to tell the story.

However, readers probably still don’t know exactly what the story is about at this point.

By intentionally leaving out this vital part of the story, Reischling purposely created a sense of suspense to hook the readers. So what could this story be about – divorce, gun control, depression?

Nutgraphs

In the next part of her story, Reischling lets the readers in by informing them exactly what the story is about:

More than 33,000 people in the United States committed suicide in 2006 -- that year, in fact, suicide was the 11th leading cause of death. For every one of those deaths, an estimated 12 to 25 people attempted suicide, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

Suicide rates are rising, and that holds true even within the Army. In 2008, 140 Soldiers in the active-duty Army took their own lives. That puts the 2008 active-duty suicide rate at 20.2 per 100,000 -- the highest ever for the Army, according to Army reports.

With these two paragraphs, Reischling revealed the focus of the story and gave it some boundaries. As a reader, you can now clearly see the focus: the rising suicide rate in the Army.

Although the lead is an important tool used to grab the readers’ attention, it also serves to bring them to the most important part of a feature story: the nutgraph.

The nutgraph lets the readers know exactly what the story is about. Because it summarizes the story, or tells the story in a nutshell, it became known as a “nutgraph.” In the example above, the first paragraph reveals some interesting statistics about suicide, which serves as a transition to the nutgraph.

As you learned earlier, your story must have focus, which is not merely the topic of the story. Focus is the topic and the angle you will take. In Reischling’s story
she reveals not only that the story is about suicide, it is also about the rising rate of suicide in the Army. Most works of fiction and nonfiction have a nutgraph of sorts. It’s important to let readers’ know what they can expect to read in the remainder of the story. Some readers might not be interested, but others may be interested enough to continue.

Let’s take a look at two more examples of how the leads and nutgraphs work together:

**Lead:**

It’s 11:30 a.m. at Fort Meade’s Gaffney Fitness Center pool. As Kristian Rankus whips around the pool, his two-tooth grin proves the temperature in the water is just right for performing his Saturday swim regimen.

He starts with hearty kicks to warm up his developing leg muscles. He then moves on to a full-blown water displacement drill, also known as good ol’ splashing.

Kristian’s muscles are warm now, and he’s ready for the aerobic part -- he holds his face under the water and blows bubbles, coming up to gasp, giggle and then gaze into the eyes of his father, Dan Rankus, who’s been holding his 1-year-old son afloat during his “workout.”

Again, notice how this lead grabs the readers’ attention, introduces the topic, sets a fun tone for the article, and establishes a third-person point of view. However, the focus of the story has not been revealed.
Here is the story’s nutgraph:

“Rankus is employed in the Fort Meade community, and the workout is actually the parent and toddler swim class, a water familiarization program the post fitness center began Monday to increase swimming safety.

This nutgraph delivers. Not only does it include the four W’s, the focus is clear and concise – a water familiarization program designed to increase swimming safety.

Let’s take a look at one more lead and nutgraph:

Lead:

Bruno is balancing on his hind legs, his front paws pressing on the mesh of his cage. The 5-year-old black lab is panting furiously, and from toe to snout his sleek body is trembling with suppressed energy. The dog erupts into a raucous monologue. His caretaker doesn’t seem to notice the noise.

“You get used to it,” she yells over the din of the kennel. Indeed, the black lab is only one dog currently being held in the compound of cages at the Fort Meade Veterinary Treatment Facility. The dogs held create quite a chorus.

It’s bittersweet music for Joanna C. Brown, who said she has been taking care of dogs, cats and other house-pets at VTF since she began working there as a certified assistant lab animal technician five months ago.

Is this lead likely to grab the readers’ attention? Does it introduce the subject of the story? What tone does it set? From what perspective is it written -- first person, second person or third person? Does it prematurely reveal the focus of the story?

Here is the story’s nutgraph:

The mission of VTF is to ensure these animals are disease-free so they won’t present a health risk if adopted. In fact, strays are the only animals the VTF will treat with anything other than a vaccination.

Does this nutgraph deliver? Is the focus – topic and angle – clearly stated?

Note: There are few times you should write a feature from a perspective other than third person. However, there are times when an author might write in first person, such as in editorials and commentaries, or second person in such features where the direct address “you” is used for effect. You will write all of your features using third-person perspective.
Feature lead categories

Now that you know what leads and nutographs are and how they work together, let’s take a closer look at four basic lead categories.

Summary lead

Summary leads for features are similar to summary news leads you learned to write earlier in the course. They answer some or all of the six basic questions: who, what, where, when and sometimes why and how.

Usually summary news leads are reserved for those times when journalists are working under a deadline. When you are writing a feature, you usually have more time, which gives you the luxury of setting up your articles with well-crafted and engaging introductory paragraphs.

Although summary news leads are the least desirable way to introduce your stories, there are times when they work. Here’s an example:

A healthy 17-year-old heart pumped the gift of life through 34-year-old Bruce Murray Friday, following a four-hour transplant operation that doctors said went without a hitch.

-- “It fluttered and became Bruce Murray’s Heart” By Jonathan Bor, Syracuse Post-Standard, May 12, 1984

Notice in this example, the who, what and when are answered. The “where” is answered later in the story. With this one simple sentence, the author has grabbed the readers’ attention and created suspense to encourage them to read on.

Here’s another example:

Along the tracks where two soldiers were fatally struck by a train Saturday night near Neckarhausen, reminders of the accident are easily visible.

A woman’s broken watch, the broken heel from a high-heeled shoe and a piece of the fiberglass body of the train lie a few feet away from flowers, teddy bears with angel’s wings and burned-out candles.

-- “Train tracks in Germany scoured for clues in crossing deaths of 2 U.S. soldiers” By Matt Millham, Stars and Stripes, Oct. 17, 2006

In this example, the author has revealed the four W’s – who, what, where and when – cleverly wrapped up in the description of the personal remnants leftover from the devastating accident. Readers appreciate these detailed images because they help paint a picture of the devastation. Another way you can demonstrate is through the use of anecdotes, and they make a great way to start your story and grab your readers’ attention.

Anecdotal lead

An anecdote is an account of a particular incident or event that is interesting or amusing. It is a short story within the larger story that helps illustrate a major point of the story, and it is an excellent way to introduce a feature and grab your readers’ attention.

Let’s take a look at an example of an anecdotal lead written by Spc. Amburr J. Reese, a former Basic Public Affairs-Writer course student:
Todd P. Cichonowicz had packed his old car and threw his motorcycle in the trunk. He said he had just dropped out of college and was headed to Colorado with no focus and a need to travel. He settled in a town called Dillon and started working at the local ski area. One day after getting home from work, he decided to grab his fishing pole and head up into the mountains.

Cichonowicz said he was about 8,000 feet up in elevation when he stumbled upon a shallow pond. "I could see the trout rising up to the surface of the water," he said.

As he approached, the fish saw him and dropped to the bottom of the pond. He tried a few more times to get close, but the fish kept outsmarting him, he said. Finally he ended up crawling on his hands and knees toward the edge of the pond, where he had to tactfully whip his fly rod sideways.

"It was interesting to see how smart yet timid they were," he said.

In this example of a personality feature about a man and the impact fly fishing had on his life, Reese begins her story by painting a picture of a particular event experienced by the subject. For readers, it creates a motion picture of sorts in their heads. From this somewhat comical image they see action, and they immediately identify with the fisherman.

Also, notice the anecdote is written in past tense. Reese was not an eyewitness to the action. It was something that happened in the past and must be seen through the eyes of the source. For an anecdote to be successful it must be somewhat detailed, and it must include a time and place. In this example, the action took place “one day” at a shallow pond on a mountain.

Let’s look at one more example:

President George W. Bush stood in the Rose Garden of the White House addressing a group of reporters and fielding their questions. Among the group of reporters stood Air Force Master Sgt. Linda J. Luttrell. Now an instructor at the Defense Information School here, Luttrell recalled the day she first saw the president. It was her first day on the job, and she said she looked on with disbelief at her surroundings. She said she never imagined that she, a small town Georgia native, would ever end up working for one of the most powerful men in the world.

Again, in this anecdotal lead the author grabs the readers’ attention through a short account of an airman’s first day on the job as one of the president’s official photographers. Readers will be able to easily identify with Luttrell.

Here are some characteristics common to anecdotal leads:

- They must show action.
- They are short.
- They are told from the source’s perspective.
- The reporter was not there to witness the action.
- Anecdotal leads must include a time and place.
- They are written in the past tense.

Anecdotal leads aren’t the only way to start a story full of action and energy. When the reporter is an eyewitness to an event, he can become the readers’ narrator. Let’s take a look at one of the most popular ways to introduce your feature stories – narrative leads.
**Narrative lead**

The narrative lead puts the reader into the story by narrating some type of action the reader can vividly picture in his mind.

The reporter lets the reader become the person involved in the scenario, either by leaving a vacuum that the reader mentally fills, or by allowing the reader to identify with the person in the midst of the action.

It is the same technique fiction writers use, with one major difference: The journalist doesn’t create a situation, but recreates one that has occurred.

Narrative leads are especially effective when the writer wants the reader to closely identify with a particular person or action.

**Here are some characteristics common to narrative leads:**

- They must show action.
- They are written from the reporter’s perspective.
- The reporter was an eyewitness to the action.
- They are written in present tense to show immediacy.

Let’s take a look at a narrative lead:

> With his handler urging him to "seek," the dog bent to the task at hand -- trying to uncover three bags of narcotics hidden on the second floor of an abandoned barracks.

> The dog wove in and out of the empty rooms. The silence was broken only by the occasional "seek." And, as the dog discovered each bag, he got his reward -- a pat on the head, a kind word and a bouncing ball.

Similar to an anecdotal lead, there is action in this example, but it is slightly different. The author is reporting the action from his perspective.

He was an eyewitness to the scene. Also notice it is written in present tense to give it a feeling of immediacy. Finally, notice it is written in third person.

Let’s take a look at another example of a narrative lead written by Spc. Joe Simonetti, who is also a former Basic Public Affairs-Writer course student.

> It's a typical night at the U.S. Army Signal School Detachment Student Company here. The end of duty hours means most soldiers put on their civilian clothes and let loose for a few hours before returning to their rooms. Food deliveries arrive every few minutes, the cartons of which overflow from each of the garbage cans in the recreation room.

> In the theater room a television is tuned to the Pentagon Channel. The show "Grill Sergeants," a lifestyle program that teaches soldiers about healthy eating, is on, but few soldiers notice.

> A group of soldiers known as "the pizza guys" are participating in their nightly ritual of eating as many pieces of pizza as their stomachs can hold.

In this human-interest feature, about healthy food choices available at the post dining facility, it is clear to the readers the author was an eyewitness to the action. Also notice some of the other characteristics of a narrative lead: written in present tense and uses third-person perspective.

When writing a narrative lead you must be careful not to contrive a situation. By definition, contrived means obviously planned, artificial or forced. In writing it
means to deliberately craft an example scenario that suits the point you’re trying to illustrate, even if you were not an eyewitness to the actual event.

For example, you may attend physical training with your unit on a daily basis, and now you’re tasked with writing a feature about the benefits of daily physical training. Instead of piecing together a scenario from memory, you should actually attend a PT session as an impartial observer and report the details you see. A contrived lead does not report on a real event and is considered fabrication.

**Descriptive lead**

- The descriptive lead, as the word implies, describes a scene or person.

  This lead draws a mental picture of the subject or site and places the reader a few feet away, in a position to see, hear and smell. No action is taking place — the writer simply “sets the stage,” usually by describing what the reader should see, hear, smell or know.

  The important thing to remember is that the stage should be significant to the focus — and interesting. The language must be vivid and colorful.

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### Leads characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Anecdotal</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
<th>Descriptive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Similar to the summary news lead. Includes at least the 4 W's.</td>
<td>□ Must show action.</td>
<td>□ Must show action.</td>
<td>□ Effective when no action is present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Often used for a news feature.</td>
<td>□ A short story told from the source’s perspective.</td>
<td>□ Written from the reporter’s perspective.</td>
<td>□ Written from the reporter’s perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Simple to write.</td>
<td>□ The reporter was not there to see the action.</td>
<td>□ The reporter was an eyewitness to the action.</td>
<td>□ Reporter must rely heavily on all senses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Might be a good way to start a story covering a subject that will interest most readers.</td>
<td>□ Must include a time and place.</td>
<td>□ Written in present tense to give the feeling of immediacy.</td>
<td>□ Usually written in present tense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Written in past or future tense.</td>
<td>□ Written in past tense.</td>
<td>□ An excellent way to grab readers’ attention and hook them.</td>
<td>□ May be used to describe a scene or a person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Least effective way to grab readers’ attention.</td>
<td>□ An excellent way to grab readers’ attention.</td>
<td>□ A great way to interest readers when the focus is on such subjects as travel locations or points of interest.</td>
<td>□ A great way to interest readers when the focus is on such subjects as travel locations or points of interest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Here are some characteristics common to descriptive leads:

- They are effective when there is no action present.
- They are written from the reporter’s perspective.
- The reporter must rely heavily on all of his senses.
- They are usually written in present tense.

The descriptive lead is a particularly popular choice for feature stories about travel locations, points of interest and personalities.

Let’s look at an example:

_The weight room is quiet. It is too early for the after-hour workouts. The lunch crowd has gone. Weight machines, with their bars and handles and pedals and benches, sit empty, looking like some kind of Jungle Jim set run amok._

_The sour smell of sweat hangs over it all. Mirrors ring the room, reflecting the stillness._

_Errol Wilson, sitting in front of one of those mirrors, is in his environment. He is a bodybuilder, which, to him, is the equivalent of being an artist._

Although readers are introduced to Errol Wilson, the subject of this feature, there is no action taking place. It is clear the author was an eyewitness and relied heavily on his senses. Also notice, it is written in present tense. However, not all descriptive leads have to be as extensive as this:

_Recently, Fort Meade and other Army installations faced a problem with deteriorating barracks. In this example of a news feature, the reporter used a short descriptive lead to demonstrate the problem._

_Mold covers pipes and grows from walls, while pipes leak and paint peels from the 1950s-era barracks housing service members stationed at Fort Meade. “One way to look at the barracks is if you would let your children live there,” said Marine Maj. Danny Chung, the commanding officer of 130 Marines at Fort Meade. “I wouldn’t let mine live there.”_

Be careful not to get the descriptive and narrative confused. A descriptive lead describes a scene; a narrative lead tells what’s going on in that scene. Think of them in play terms: the descriptive lead represents the props of a play; the narrative lead represents the action that goes on around those props.
Guidelines for writing leads

Here are some final thoughts on writing leads:

- The best leads set the tone for the story. The lead must be appropriate for the story. It should present an idea and give the reader a reason for wanting to continue the story.

- Although no specific length is required for a feature lead, good ones still must be tightly written, and they are usually brief.

- Unlike straight news, a feature lead may be more than one paragraph, and the paragraphs may contain more than one sentence.

- Feature leads also establish rapport with the reader by using a casual, informal style.

- Make the lead enticing enough so the reader will want to know more; the reader should be interested, as well as curious.

- Make the lead simple and easy to understand. You should try to be effective, not impressive. Action verbs and colorful language will add life and zest to the story.

- The writer normally stays out of the story. The idea is to draw the reader and story close together. The writer simply becomes an intruder unless he is involved in the focus in a significant way – such as in an editorial or commentary piece. The writer should keep his eye on the material, not in the mirror.

- The feature lead must be based on fact, not fiction. But it can be written with the liveliness of good fiction. It can provide a plot, a character and dialogue.

Remember, the lead is the place to cling to your highest standards. Without a strong lead, your feature could be overlooked, and your research, interviews and writing would go to waste. Also remember that the nutgraph contains the focus – the story’s glue. It holds your story together and gives you direction. Use the guidelines you learned in this class as a foundation for writing leads and nutgraphs here and throughout your career.
Conclusion

In this lecture you have learned that leads are essential to grabbing your reader’s attention and guiding them to invest their time in your story. In addition, you have learned the importance of writing a strong nutgraph in order to clearly reveal the focus of your story. In combination, the lead and nutgraph work together to interest your readers and tell them exactly what they may expect from the story.
References


Patterson, B. (1986). Write to be read: A practical guide to feature writing. Iowa State Press


Feature writing handbook (2008)