Leads - external news story

Previously, we focused on our internal audience, and you learned how to write a summary news lead for internal release. As you learned, the summary news lead is the foundation on which every news story rests. In this lesson, we will focus our energy on our external audiences – those people who live and work outside of our gates, such as the American public, civic leaders and members of the media. We need to be able to communicate with them, but sometimes it’s not easy.

In today’s fast-paced society that has a 24-hour news cycle, amateur video footage and bustling newsrooms, our messages can easily get overlooked. In this lesson, you will learn an easy, step-by-step method for writing summary news leads for external release, and we will review the Department of Defense’s guidelines for release. Learning this is at the core of military public affairs.
Writing leads with datelines

The summary news lead for external release is similar to the internal summary news lead. The basic elements are the same. First, it should be a single sentence with about 25 to 30 words. Also, it must have at least the four W’s – who, what, where and when, and it may sometimes have why or how. If one of the four W’s is missing, it is considered a weak news lead.

Remember, we write the summary news lead in this fashion to give readers the most essential facts up front. From there, we write a single sentence bridge. Finally, we write the body of the story in descending order of importance. This story structure, as we studied while writing an internal news story, is called the inverted pyramid. In addition to giving the essential information up front, the inverted pyramid structure is useful to editors when they need to cut part of the story to make it fit in the publication. With the least important facts near the end of the story, they can simply cut from the bottom up, preserving the most important facts near the top of the story.

Let’s take a closer look at the 5 W’s and H.

- **Who** -- Remember, the “who” element can be one of three things – an individual, a group of people or an organization.

  **Examples:**
  
  An administrative specialist at the Defense Information School
  
  The library staff at DINFOS

- **What** -- The “what” element tells what happened at a planned or unplanned event. Be brief and get to the point.

- **Where** -- The “where” element gives the location of the news event. Remember, “here” is often specific enough. When writing your leads, be careful to clearly state “where” the action of the news peg took place. You may also have to clarify “where” a person works or “where” an organization is located.

  **Example:**
  FORT MEADE, Md. -- A Milwaukee native, now a student at the Defense Information School here, graduated with a perfect score at the school today in all areas of study in the Basic Public Affairs Specialist course.

- **When** -- “When” is the time or date of an event. In many cases, you may use a general term in the lead, such as “this morning,” “tonight” or “today.” Report the specific time later in the story if it is essential. You may need to be more specific in the lead, such as “4:30 p.m. today,” if the readers need to take action by a certain time of the day.

- **Why** -- The “why” concerns the cause of an event. Generally, you may want to save the “why” for the bridge or the body of the story. Sometimes,

The Defense Information School here

It’s also important to note that when identifying an individual person who is not prominent, use the impersonal who, which is the person’s job title and unit. But if the individual person is prominent, it is appropriate to use his or her full name in the lead.
however, the “why” provides an intriguing lead.

- **How** -- The “how” element relates the manner in which something was done. Again, it can provide an intriguing lead. But usually the “how” is saved for either the bridge or body of the story. Remember, your lead must be concise. Get to the point.

Other elements of the sentence must be considered as well.

**Lead emphasis** – As you learned previously, the lead emphasis is the most important of the four W’s – who, what, where and when. You also learned the “who” or “what” elements usually form your lead emphasis.

**News peg** – The news peg forms the basis for why you are writing this news story in the first place. The entire story hangs from it like a coat. That’s why it’s called the peg. Always be on the lookout for the most recent information. For example, if a servicemember in your unit saved two children from drowning in a local lake two months ago, that is not necessarily news. It lost some of its value because it happened two months ago. If he or she is receiving a commendation medal today for his or her lifesaving actions, that is news. Again, always look for the most recent information.

The fundamentals we have been talking about are common to both the internal summary news lead and the external lead. Now let’s look at some of the things that make the external summary news lead different. The first thing that sets the external lead apart from the internal lead is a dateline.

The function of a dateline is to tell readers where the story is being written or from where it is being filed.

Take a look in the AP Stylebook under the entry “datelines.”

Datelines on stories should contain a city name, entirely in capital letters, followed in most cases by the name of the state, county or territory where the city is located.

If you think about it, military installations are independent cities with infrastructures and governing bodies. In many cases, they have their own zip codes. For dateline purposes, military installations are treated just like cities – entirely in capital letters followed by the name of the state, county or territory where the installation is located.

**Local angle** -- Whenever you write a story for external release, you must always think about for whom this release is intended. Sometimes you will target a broad audience – perhaps your entire service or the entire nation. For example, let’s say a major accident or incident happens at your installation. A lot of people will be interested in this.

Other times, your audience will be limited. For example, let’s say a sole service member at your installation earns a military award for a recent accomplishment. Now your audience becomes limited. Readers in that person’s hometown might be interested. People at your base might also be interested. Finally, there may be some specific groups, such as members of a college alumni association, who might be interested. There are certain stories that will interest only the local communities neighboring your installation.

Regardless of your target audience, the most appealing aspect of the story to
your readers will form the lead emphasis. This is called the local angle.

**Local angle**

Readers want to know immediately what is in it for them. Let’s look at the example of the sole servicemember who earned a military award for a recent accomplishment. He is an administration specialist with the 89th Communications Squadron at Andrews Air Force Base, Md., where you are assigned to the public affairs office. He hails from Ashland, Ohio. Today, he received an Air Force Commendation Medal here for pulling a man from his burning car on base last month, saving his life.

If written for internal release, the summary news lead would look something like this:

*An administration specialist from the 89th Communications Squadron here received an Air Force Commendation Medal here today for pulling a man from a burning car here last month.*

Your internal audience has an immediate connection to the news; it has the mass appeal element of proximity. But if you intend to release the same story externally, what is in it for your external audience?

First, you must ask yourself, “Who, externally, would care?” Perhaps people who live in the award recipient’s hometown would be interested. Perhaps people who belong to the same organization he belongs to would be interested.

But if you released the story in the same format as an internal story, your readers may not see the connection or what’s in it for them. Therefore, you have to look for a local angle to hook your external readers. Now, let’s rewrite this summary news lead for external release to his hometown. As stated, he is from Ashland, Ohio. This town has a population of about 20,000 people, and it has one newspaper called the Ashland Times Gazette. If you want this story to run in the Times Gazette, you must first appeal to the editor. He must see the immediate connection to his readership.

What’s in it for them? Well, he hails from Ashland. So let’s begin with that.

*ANDREWS AIR FORCE BASE, Md. – An Ashland native . . .*

Now that we’ve hooked the editor and the readers with a local angle, let’s tell them the military tie. After all, that’s the reason we’re writing this story. Also, it gives the impersonal who.

*ANDREWS AIR FORCE BASE, Md. – An Ashland native, now an administration specialist from the 89th Communications Squadron here,*

Finally, let’s flesh out the lead with the remaining details.

*ANDREWS AIR FORCE BASE, Md. – An Ashland native, now an administration specialist from the 89th Communications Squadron here,*

In this external lead example, you may have noticed another difference from how we write internal summary leads – the “when” element.

As you previously learned, the way we report the “when” element is based on the dateweek, which has at its center
the publication day. This publication date is fixed. Every week the installation publication is published on Thursday.

With external releases, the publication date is the day you send the release via fax, e-mail or some other mode. Therefore, the publication day is flexible. You would adjust the dateline accordingly.

Because of this ever-changing publication date, it is important to write at the top of the first page the date you send the release.

Many offices use a special form for external releases. In addition to the release date, there is a header that gives interested media contact information for your office. There may also be a place to write down the title and number of the release for tracking purposes. Finally, some offices write a suggested headline in place of a slug. Let’s take a look at an example release form. See figure #1

Case study

Let’s pretend we work in the public affairs office at Fort Drum, N.Y. The 2nd Brigade Combat Team is scheduled to conduct an artillery live fire exercise three days from today.

"Who would be interested in this information?" This could have an impact on the local community because soldiers will be using 105 mm howitzers, which can be quite loud. Also, during similar exercises in the past, members of the media have been interested in reporting on this event, and we have always welcomed them because it gives us a chance to demonstrate what we do at Fort Drum.

Now, let’s write a summary news lead about this event for external release. We will send this release to all media venues in the local communities surrounding the post. First, let’s look at the available facts and determine the local angle.

Now, let’s start with the dateline:

FORT DRUM, N.Y. –

Now, let’s add the local angle:

FORT DRUM, N.Y. – Communities surrounding Fort Drum may experience loud booms

Finally, let’s flesh out the lead with the remaining W’s

FORT DRUM, N.Y. – Communities surrounding Fort Drum may experience loud booms (date) as soldiers here are scheduled to conduct a live-fire exercise on post, using 105 mm howitzer cannons.

This is only one example. Each situation is different. Before releasing any information, you must analyze it to determine who would be interested or need this information. Then write your lead, using a lead emphasis that catches the attention of your readers. If you fail to immediately catch their attention, it is likely your release will be overlooked and thrown into the nearest trashcan.
Figure 1: Example of external release lead on sample media release form.
Formatting an external news release

Figure 1 is an example of a press release. You may find some variations in the field and fleet. For academic purposes, you will use the format below.

In the top left corner of the first page, type your name, class number and the name of the assignment (Leads 3, Feats 4, etc.). Directly below the name of the assignment, type the release date. The release date is important to an external news release. It helps the person receiving the news release determine the “when” element of the article. If the release date is wrong or missing, it could possibly make the “when” element inaccurate or confusing. For example, if you report in your news release an event took place today and you forgot to type the release date, the receiver would not know when “today” is. If you type the wrong release date, this would cause the “when” element to be an error in fact.

Place a slug (not a headline) -- one word, all upper case -- about one third to one half way down the page (3.5- or 4-inch mark on the vertical ruler).

Always double-space your copy to allow room for copy-editing and grading.

At the bottom of each page that is not the end of the story, leaving at least a 1-inch margin, type or write in -more- to show that another page follows.

Repeat your name, slug and appropriate page number in the upper left corner of each succeeding page (type or write in). Hit return and continue your story. Don’t leave extra room.

At the bottom of the last page of the story, type or write in -30- to show there is no more copy.

Copy should be neatly edited with a pencil. Use only the copy-editing symbols shown in your copy-editing booklet and any others your instructor shows you.

External release format example
Conclusion

Everything you will do in the public affairs career field will involve communicating with the public, either internal or external. The main tool you will use to accomplish this task is the basic news release. You have added to your knowledge by learning to write a summary news lead for external release. By following the basic guidelines you learned in this lesson, your task of writing news releases will become second nature to you throughout your careers.
References


