

THE  
POWER



OF LEADS

A BEST NEWSPAPER WRITING  
BROWN BAG

Poynter.

# Best Newspaper Writing Brown Bag

Brown Bag = Newsroom jargon for an in-house training session

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A Best Newspaper Writing Brown Bag is a blueprint for a newsroom conversation on the craft of reporting and writing.

It provides everything journalists need for a balanced meal:

- **Main course:** An award-winning story, column, or editorial.
- **Side dish:** Introduction and analysis by a Poynter faculty member.
- **Dessert:** Inspiration from American Society of Newspaper Writing Award winners gleaned from their interviews in Best Newspaper Writing.
- **Beverage:** Talking Points and Assignment Desk suggestions that can guide the discussion or the steps needed to take your writing and editing to the next level.

## How to use a Best Newspaper Writing Brown Bag

### In a Newsroom or Classroom:

1. Schedule a Brown Bag session.
2. Distribute copies in advance.
3. Use the content—award-winning journalism, interview excerpts, and analysis—as the starting point for a conversation.
4. You might begin by asking participants three questions:
  - What surprised you about the material?
  - What did you learn from reading the material?
  - What do you need to learn next to get better at your craft?
5. Invite the participants to do one or more of the Assignment Desk exercises. Ask them to share what they've written, either with another participant or the whole group.

### On Your Own:

1. Read the material.
2. Do one or more of the Talking Points and Assignment Desk exercises.
3. Ask yourself three questions about it:
  - What surprised you about the material?
  - What did you learn from reading the material?
  - What do you need to learn next to get better at your craft?

# The Power of Leads: A Best Newspaper Writing Brown Bag

By Chip Scanlan

When journalists talk about beginnings of stories the word they use is lead. Sometimes it's spelled "lede," a throwback to the precomputer age when the word for first paragraphs had to be distinguished from the word for the molten lead used to print newspapers. Leads are the foundation of every news story, no matter what the medium.

An effective lead makes a promise to the reader or viewer: I have something important, something interesting, to tell you. A good lead beckons and invites. It informs, attracts and entices. If there's any poetry in journalism, it's most often found in the lead, as in the classic opening of what could have been a mundane weather forecast:

Snow, followed by small boys on sleds.

When the subject is leads, there's no shortage of opinions about their role, their preferred length, the rules they should follow or break. But no one disagrees about this enduring fact about lead writing: It's hard work.

Jack Cappon of The Associated Press called it, rightly, "the agony of square one."

"There is no getting around it, although every writer sometimes wishes there were," Cappon says. "Every story must have a beginning. A lead. Incubating a lead is a cause of great agony. Why is no mystery. Based on the lead, a reader makes a critical decision: Shall I go on?"

Whether you're a new reporter or a veteran writing for a newspaper, an online news site, radio or television news, the ability to sum up a story in a single paragraph or draw the reader in with an anecdote or scene has become a daily job requirement.

Given their importance, it's not surprising that good leads, and a range of passionate beliefs about their importance and composition, abound in the 25-year history of Best Newspaper Writing, the annual collection of award-winning writing selected by the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

To celebrate the silver anniversary of Best Newspaper Writing, each month Poynter profiles past winners and provides a brownbag loaded with ways to put the books' lessons to work.

In this BNW Brown Bag, you'll hear ASNE winners discuss the role of leads in their stories. You can also read a gallery of prizewinning leads from the series, tackle some provocative questions designed to boost your own skills at crafting leads that compel the reader to start reading, and find resources to boost your lead writing skills.

Some leads, a few miraculous ones, will fly off your fingers and appear, as if by magic, on the computer screen before you. But, as BNW winners attest, most are the product of time and effort, of cutting and moving and pasting, asking tough questions, searching for the right word. Don't assume that once you've written a lead, you have a lead, whether it works or not—it's there, stuck on top of the story like a great hunk of cement. Think instead of leads like a piece of clay that you can play with and refine.

## BNW Winners on Leads

"I look at leads as my one frail opportunity to grab the reader. If I don't grab them at the start, I can't count on grabbing them in the middle, because they'll never get to the middle. Maybe 30 years ago, I would give it a slow boil. Now, it's got to be microwaved. I don't look at my leads as a chance to show off my flowery writing. My leads are there to get you in and to keep you hooked to the story so that you can't go away."

— Mitch Albom, *Detroit Free Press*  
Best Newspaper Writing 1996, Sports Writing

"And there's that little thing called a lead. I know that I don't spend as much time on leads as I used to. We make a mistake when we're younger. We feel compelled to hit a home run in the very first sentence. So we spend a lot of time staring at the typewriter. I'll settle for a quiet single, or even a long foul, anything that gets me started. When I talk to young writers, that's the most sensible advice I can give them. Perfect anecdotal leads are so rare."

— Saul Pett, Associated Press  
Best Newspaper Writing 1981 Non-Deadline Writing

"I often want to start in the moment, and start with the tension up front...My concern all the time is to bring readers in, to bring them in really fast."

— DeNeen L. Brown, *The Washington Post*  
Best Newspaper Writing 1999, Non-Deadline Writing

"Usually I write a lead and say to myself, 'Well that's a better ending than a lead.' So I'll put that one away and try to come up with a different lead."

— David Finkel, *St. Petersburg Times*  
Best Newspaper Writing 1986, Non-Deadline Writing

"I have to have a lead or I can't write anything. I have to have my first sentence, because that's my whole piece. That's the tone, that says what is this piece about, it's the theme, the thing by which everything hangs. If I don't have that first sentence, I just can't keep going forward."

— Susan Trausch, *The Boston Globe*  
Best Newspaper Writing 1995, Editorial Writing

# Gallery of Award-Winning Leads

## Terror Rides a School Bus

By Gail Epstein, Frances Robles and Martin Merzer *The Miami Herald*, November 3, 1995

A waiter fond of poet Ralph Waldo Emerson attends morning prayers at his church, steps across the street and hijacks a school bus. Owing \$15,639.39 in back taxes, wielding what he says is a bomb, Catalino Sang shields himself with disabled children.

Follow my orders, he says, or I will kill the kids. “No problem, I will,” says driver Alicia Chapman, crafty and calm. “But please don’t hurt the children.”

The saga of Dade County school bus No. CX-17, bound for Blue Lakes Elementary, begins.

## A Summons from History

By Susan Trausch, *The Boston Globe*, Sept. 23, 1994

The past came to claim Aleksandras Lileikis this week. It knocked on his door on Sumner Street in Norwood, shattering his quiet present and shocking the friends and neighbors who thought they knew the man in the yellow house. It knocked on all of our doors, pointing to the genocide of more than 50 years, demanding that we hear the stories and seek the truth.

## Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin is Killed

By Barton Gellman  
*The Washington Post*, Sunday,  
November 5, 1995

JERUSALEM, Nov. 4—A right-wing Jewish extremist shot and killed Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin tonight as he departed a peace rally attended by more than 100,000 in Tel Aviv, throwing Israel’s government and the Middle East peace process into turmoil.

## A Murder Story

By David Finkel, *St. Petersburg Times*,  
May 26, 1985

Her weight’s gone up. Gray hairs have sprouted. She’s gotten used to flat shoes instead of heels and eggplant-shaped dresses instead of the gowns and furs she used to wear. But after a decade in prison for having her husband killed, Betty Lou Haber, closing in on 50, is still as polite and sweet sounding as ever. “There’s never a night that I go to bed and don’t say my prayers,” she said last week. “I just do the best I can.” And that’s why Albert Haber’s surviving children are worried.

## A Sentimental Journey to la Casa of Childhood

By Mirta Ojito, *The New York Times*, Feb. 3, 1998

HAVANA—This is the moment when, in my dreams, I begin to cry. And yet, I’m strangely calm as I go up the stairs to the apartment of my childhood in Santos Suarez, the only place that, after all these years, I still refer to as la casa, home.

## Only Human Wreckage Is Left in Karubamba

By Mark Fritz, Associated Press,  
May 12, 1994

Karubamba, Rwanda—Nobody lives here anymore. Not the expectant mothers huddled outside the maternity clinic, not the families squeezed into the church, not the man who lies rotting in a schoolroom beneath a chalkboard map of Africa. Everybody here is dead. Karubamba is a vision from hell, a flesh-and-bone junkyard of human wreckage, an obscene slaughterhouse that has fallen silent save for the roaring buzz of flies the size of honeybees.

## It Fluttered and Became Bruce Murray’s Heart

By Jonathan Bor, *Syracuse Post-Standard*,  
May 12, 1984

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.

## After Life of Violence Harris Goes Peacefully

By Sam Stanton, *The Sacramento Bee*, April 22, 1992

SAN QUENTIN—In the end, Robert Alton Harris seemed determined to go peacefully, a trait that had eluded him in the 39 violent and abusive years he spent on earth.

## Facing the Void of a Life and a love Lost in a Moment

By Joan Beck, *Chicago Tribune*, July 12, 1993

At 12:30, my husband and I were having a pleasant lunch in a restaurant. At 1:30, we were back home, sitting at the kitchen counter planning a trip to Vienna and Budapest with cherished friends. At 2:30, I was walking out of the hospital emergency room in shock, a widow, my life changed forever, beyond comprehension.

## Tattoos and Freedom

By Michael Gartner, *The Daily Tribune*,  
(Ames, Iowa) Oct. 7, 1993

Let’s talk about tattoos

# Talking Points and Assignment Desk

## TALKING POINTS

1. When a passenger jet crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off Long Island, Newsday employed a summary lead that attempted to condense the entire story into a single paragraph:

A TWA jetliner bound for Paris with 229 people aboard exploded in midair last night just after taking off from Kennedy Airport and plunged into the Atlantic Ocean south of Moriches Inlet, and the Coast Guard said no survivors had been found.

List the elements contained in the lead and discuss why each was included. Are elements missing that you would have used? The story was part of a package that won the 1996 Laventhol Award for Deadline Reporting by a Team, as well as the Pulitzer Prize for spot news reporting. You can read the entire story online at <http://www.pulitzer.org/year/1997/spot-news-reporting/works/1-1/index.html>

2. In the same package, the story “Terror Darkens ‘City of Light,’” uses a single-instance, or emblem, lead, focusing on an elderly woman who arrives at the airport in Paris only to learn that the plane she had come to meet had crashed.

Paris—The elderly lady in the charcoal gray suit gazed up at the airport monitor in Charles de Gaulle Airport, wondering why the screen announced that TWA Flight 800 that should be landing had been canceled.

She was puzzled but not scared until an official quickly came over and led

her to a trauma center set up for those meeting the New York flight that went down into the waters off Long Island.

Read the entire story at:  
<http://www.pulitzer.org/year/1997/spot-news-reporting/works/2-14/index.html>

The emblem lead is a gateway approach that “uses one example to illustrate a larger topic,” notes Jack Hart, an editor at The Oregonian in his essay, “The Lexicon of Leads” (see resources below for online location). “A mainstay of magazine writing,” single-instance leads have “have spread rapidly into newspaper writing.” Look for other examples of single-instance leads. Discuss whether criticism that the device is over-used is valid.

3. In one of the stories that won Leonora LaPeter, of the Savannah Morning News, the 2000 Laventhol Award for Deadline Reporting by an Individual, the reporter chose a narrative lead rather than a summary lead story to report on the opening day of a murder trial.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Pause. Tap. Tap.

Tap.

Ashley Lewis hit the counter of the oak witness box with his index finger, mimicking what he heard through a crack in the bathroom window the night of Dec. 4, 1997, as he got ready for bed.

It sounded like a typewriter. But Lewis, testifying on the first day in the death penalty trial of Jerry Scott Heidler for the murder of a family in Santa Claus a year-and-a-half ago, found it hard to believe his mother, a secretary, would break out her typewriter at almost 2 a.m. Just a half hour before, she had told him to turn the television off and go to bed.

Lewis walked to his mother’s room and turned on the light. She was asleep in bed. He walked through the house, turning on other lights. Nothing.

“I got this real eerie feeling,” Lewis said.

Lewis did not know it yet, but a half-mile away, four of his neighbors lay dead.

Read the entire story at:  
<http://asne.org/index.cfm?id=2785#August2013>

Debate the pros and cons of this approach versus the traditional hard-news lead.



## ASSIGNMENT DESK: EXERCISES IN LEAD WRITING

1. Using Jack Hart's "Lexicon of Leads" as your guide, study a variety of leads and identify them by type. Study your own work to determine the types you use most frequently. Try for greater variety.

2. Take a national story and compare the various approaches used by different news organizations. Which leads are the most effective and why?

3. Editors and reporters know that by the time the reader picks up the morning paper, he or she has probably already heard the top stories of the day, from the radio, television, or an online news source. When that happens the decision is made, consciously, to take a different approach, as the Miami Herald did in its story "Terror Rides a School Bus." Martin Merzer, who wrote the story based on his colleagues' reporting, said he decided on a narrative approach because by the time the newspaper was published, the story had already received saturation coverage from television. "I figured our best contribution would be to tell the story in a different fashion with compelling detail." When you craft your next lead, take into consideration these guidelines:

**TIME:** Did the story just happen? Are you the first to report it, or will most people in your audience already know about it from another news source? Is the time element crucial?

**READERS' NEEDS:** Will your readers get the news first from you? If they already know the news, would they be better served with a lead that anticipates their knowledge?

**EXCLUSIVITY:** Are you the only news organization that has the story? Scoops once counted for a lot more in the days when several newspapers published in a city. Now the competition is from television and online. But there may be stories only you have, and you might want to tell the reader this is an exclusive.

4. Rewrite Leonora LaPeter's narrative opening of the murder trial story as a summary lead.

5. Collect favorite leads. (Make sure you include the source and byline so you avoid the risk of plagiarism.) Deconstruct them: What did the writer include, leave out?

6. Testing the anecdotal lead

Anecdotal leads have come in for lots of criticism over the years. Done poorly, the anecdotal lead can be a self-indulgent device for the writer and a confusing bore for the reader.

Bait-and-switch is a common failing of storytelling leads. The story begins with an anecdote that may be lively, vivid, and eminently readable, but just as it engages the reader, the tone shifts into a completely different approach. In stories like this, the person introduced in the lead never appears again. The result: reader confusion and disappointment.

### Jacqui Banaszynski, a Pulitzer Prize-winning storyteller and editor, recommends three tests for an anecdotal lead:

1. Can you easily write from the anecdote to the story's nut graf? If not - if you keep getting stuck there and struggling to transit into the story - it's likely the anecdote doesn't serve as the lead. It might be fine and purposeful, but possibly it belongs somewhere else in the body of the copy.

2. Write the story with the anecdote, then excise the anecdote and read the story without it. Does the story suffer? If not - if you don't miss it - it's probably not serving much purpose. Because we are all wedded to our words, get an independent read for this test.

3. Show that independent reader (your editor or another reporter) your anecdote as a stand-alone item, without the story hanging below it. Then ask that person what he or she thinks the story is going to be about. If that person captures the essence, you're home free. If not, rethink your approach.

## TIPS FOR REVISING LEADS

- Follow the "read aloud" rule.

- Always read your lead aloud. Give your lead a breath test. That is, can you say it in a single breath? Do you stumble over words? Does it sound like something you'd tell a friend over the phone? Does it put you to sleep or confuse you? It will do the same for your reader.

- Play the revision game.

- Count the words and see how many you can eliminate from the lead. There are many good ways to enter a story. Just because a lead appears in print, even in the best newspapers, doesn't mean it can't be revised. In fact, it may build your confidence to rewrite a published lead. Is it accurate?

- In the attempt to make leads brighter, stronger and clearer, writers and editors have been known to inject errors into the story.

- Put your leads on a "to be" diet.

Replace all forms of passive verbs - "is planning", "are hoping", - with active verbs, "plan" and "hope".

- Eliminate jargon and clichés.

Lawyers, politicians and bureaucrats thrive on arcane language. Jargon bewilders and distances readers. Clichés bore them. Strive for fresh language. William Zinsser's "On Writing Well" is the antidote for both.

Reduce redundancies and unnecessary words. Which of these two leads is stronger?

"Stricken by a nameless grief, Jesus grew very sad, and sitting in the garden he wept copious tears." Or "Jesus wept."

## MORE RESOURCES

### **Best Newspaper Writing 1979-2002.**

“The Evolution of the News Summary Lead” by  
Marcus Errico

[http://www.scripps.ohiou.edu/mediahistory/  
mhmjour1-1.htm](http://www.scripps.ohiou.edu/mediahistory/mhmjour1-1.htm)

“The Lexicon of Leads” by Jack Hart

[http://www.notrain-nogain.org/Train/Res/  
WriteARC/lex.asp](http://www.notrain-nogain.org/Train/Res/WriteARC/lex.asp)

“First Paragraphs: Inspired Openings for  
Writers and Readers” by Donald Newlove,  
(New York: Henry Holt, 1992)

Tips on Lead Writing from the Providence  
Journal:

<http://www.projo.com/words/past.htm#leads>

Tips on Lead Writing from Lee Enterprises  
Newspapers:

“The What Not To Do List”

[http://writingmatters.lee.net/articles/2003/  
04/10/front/topics/topics180.txt](http://writingmatters.lee.net/articles/2003/04/10/front/topics/topics180.txt)

“Leading Off”

[http://writingmatters.lee.net/articles/2003/  
04/10/front/topics/topics192.txt](http://writingmatters.lee.net/articles/2003/04/10/front/topics/topics192.txt)

“How to Break the Lead Barrier”

[http://poynter.org/content/content  
view.asp?id=5249](http://poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=5249)