

LEDES

HOOK YOUR READER, JOURNALISM-STYLE

The lede (or lead; both spellings are correct) is the first paragraph of any news story. It's also the most important. The lede must get readers interested in reading the article and convey the main points, all in as few words as possible. In fact, editors typically want ledes to be no longer than 35-40 words. Why so short? Readers want their news delivered quickly.

Hard-news Ledes

For hard news, get the essential information to your reader as efficiently as possible. Stick to the 5 "W's and the H" – Who, What, Where, When, Why and How. For example, let's say you're writing a story about a man who was injured when he fell off a ladder:

- Who – who is the story about? *the man*
- What – what is the story about? *he fell off a ladder while painting*
- Where – where did the event you're writing about occur? *at his house*
- When – when did it occur? *yesterday*
- Why – why did this happen? *the ladder was rickety*
- How – how did this happen? *the rickety ladder broke*

So your lede might go something like this: *A man was injured yesterday when he fell off a rickety ladder that collapsed while he was painting his house.*

That sums up the main points of the story in just 20 words, which is all you need for the lede.

Feature Ledes

Different from hard-news articles, feature stories are often human interest pieces and more narrative in style. Writing ledes for feature stories thus requires different craft than writing hard-news ledes. Below are several techniques:

Setting a Scene, Painting a Picture

Feature ledes often offer a visual image (in words) of a person or place. Here's a Pulitzer Prize-winning example by Andrea Elliott of *The New York Times*:

*The young Egyptian professional could pass for any New York bachelor.
Dressed in a crisp polo shirt and swathed in cologne, he races his Nissan Maxima
through the rain-slicked streets of Manhattan, late for a date with a tall brunette. At red lights, he
fusses with his hair.
What sets the bachelor apart from other young men on the make is the chaperon sitting
next to him -- a tall, bearded man in a white robe and stiff embroidered hat.*

Phrases like "crisp polo shirt" and "rain-slicked streets" don't tell us precisely what the article is about, but they draw us in through vivid description.

Use An Anecdote (Anecdotal Lede)

Tell a story or begin with an anecdote, a short account of an event. Here's an example by Edward Wong of *The New York Times*' Beijing bureau:

*BEIJING — The first sign of trouble was powder in the baby's urine. Then there was blood. By
the time the parents took their son to the hospital, he had no urine at all.
Kidney stones were the problem, doctors told the parents. The baby died on May 1 in the
hospital, just two weeks after the first symptoms appeared. His name was Yi Kaixuan. He was 6
months old.*

The parents filed a lawsuit on Monday in the arid northwest province of Gansu, where the family lives, asking for compensation from Sanlu Group, the maker of the powdered baby formula that Kaixuan had been drinking. It seemed like a clear-cut liability case; since last month, Sanlu has been at the center of China's biggest contaminated food crisis in years. But as in two other courts dealing with related lawsuits, judges have so far declined to hear the case.

Length of Feature Ledes

Both Elliott and Longman use several paragraphs to begin their stories. That's fine – feature ledes in newspaper articles generally employ two to four paragraphs to set a scene or convey an anecdote (magazine articles can take much longer.) But pretty soon, even a feature story has to get to the point.

The Nutgraf

The nutgraf is where the feature writer lays out for the reader exactly what the story is all about. It usually follows the first few paragraphs of the scene-setting or story-telling the writer has done. A nutgraf can be a single paragraph or more.

Here's Andrea Elliott's lede again, this time with the nutgraf included:

The young Egyptian professional could pass for any New York bachelor.

Dressed in a crisp polo shirt and swathed in cologne, he races his Nissan Maxima through the rain-slicked streets of Manhattan, late for a date with a tall brunette. At red lights, he fusses with his hair.

What sets the bachelor apart from other young men on the make is the chaperon sitting next to him -- a tall, bearded man in a white robe and stiff embroidered hat.

"I pray that Allah will bring this couple together," the man, Sheik Reda Shata, says, clutching his seat belt and urging the bachelor to slow down.

Christian singles have coffee hour. Young Jews have JDate. But many Muslims believe that it is forbidden for an unmarried man and woman to meet in private. In predominantly Muslim countries, the job of making introductions and even arranging marriages typically falls to a vast network of family and friends.

In Brooklyn, there is Mr. Shata.

Week after week, Muslims embark on dates with him in tow. Mr. Shata, the imam of a Bay Ridge mosque, juggles some 550 "marriage candidates," from a gold-toothed electrician to a professor at Columbia University. The meetings often unfold on the green velour couch of his office, or over a meal at his favorite Yemeni restaurant on Atlantic Avenue.

We now know that this is the story of a Brooklyn imam who helps bring young Muslim couples together for marriage. Note that Elliott could just as easily have written the story with a hard-news lede like this:

An imam based in Brooklyn says he works as a chaperon with hundreds of young Muslims in an effort to bring them together for marriage.

That's certainly quicker. But it's not nearly as interesting as Elliott's descriptive, well-crafted approach.

When To Use The Feature Approach

Feature ledes can be entertaining, but they aren't appropriate for every article. Breaking news and time-sensitive stories generally require hard-news ledes. Use feature ledes, on the other hand, for stories that examine issues, people, or situations in a more in-depth way.

Bibliography

In creating this handout, we consulted and/or modified information from the following sources:

<http://journalism.about.com/od/writing/a/featureledes.htm>

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/journalism/gissler/tips/Tip-ledes.html>