

THE LEAD

The lead is usually the toughest part of writing a story. The lead is the first word, sentence or paragraph of the story. Sometimes it can be two or three paragraphs. Whatever its length, the lead has several important jobs to do. First, it must interest the reader in the rest of the story. Imagine the reader is impatient, with lots of other things he or she could be doing instead of reading your story. Imagine the reader saying, "Get to the POINT! Don't waste my time! Tell me the STORY!" If your reader were stranded on a desert island with nothing to read but your story, you could probably get away with a vague, rambling lead. But today's reader has a BART train to catch, the kids are fighting again and the TV never stops blaring. Your story has tough competition.

Surveys have shown that most people get their news from TV, but many then turn to newspapers for the details behind the headlines. Your job is to write a short, punchy, informative lead to attract readers who have grown accustomed to TV's "sound bite" journalism. But then you must supply the details, the insights, the context that TV doesn't have time for.

What are the rules for a good lead?