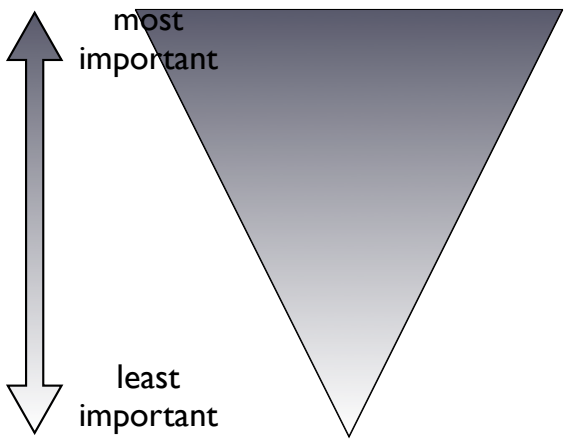
Writing Practice/Review

Leads and Inverted Pyramid

Inverted Pyramid



Write a lead from the following information:

An accident occurred. It happened yesterday. Today is Tuesday. The accident was a car accident. It happened in Murfreesboro where Main Street and Broad Street intersect. One person was killed. The person was John Frazier. He was 20 years old and lived in Murfreesboro at 212 Moore Court. He was driving a blue 1998 Ford Mustang. He was driving northwest on Broad Street at about 5 p.m. He lost control of the car. It was raining, and the road was slick. He was also driving about 20 mph over the speed limit. He was the only one in the car. The car smashed into a utility pole along Broad Street. The impact crushed the whole front of the car. Frazier was thrown through the car's windshield. He landed on the pavement some 20 feet away. He wasn't wearing a seat belt. He was killed instantly.

From "Six rules for writing straight news leads" (http://mtsu32.mtsu.edu:11178/171/leads.htm) and "Inverted pyramid story format" (http://mtsu32.mtsu.edu:11178/171/pyramid.htm) by Ken Blake, Ph.D., Middle Tennessee State University

Six rules for writing straight news leads

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Rule #1: A straight news lead should be a single paragraph consisting of a single sentence, should contain no more than 30 words, and should summarize, at minimum, the most newsworthy "what," "where" and "when" of the story.

- Example: "Fire destroyed a house on Main Street early Monday morning."
  - The lead is a single-sentence paragraph. Note, please, that a lead should be written in ordinary English, not the clipped phrasing reserved for headlines like "Main Street home destroyed in early morning fire." Headlines, which appear in large print above the stories they introduce, are written that way to conserve space.
  - It contains 10 words -- far fewer than the 30-word limit. Notice that the word count includes even little words like "a" and "on."
  - It summarizes the main "what" of the story, which is that fire destroyed a house.
  - It also provides the "where" of the story with the phrase "on Main Street."
  - Finally, it gives the "when" of the story with the phrase "early Monday morning."
  - Important note: There are some mental gymnastics involved in correctly conveying the "when" of a newspaper story. Suppose, for example, that today is Monday, and the fire happened this morning. You might be tempted to write the lead like this: "Fire destroyed a house on Main Street early this morning." And doing so would be just fine if your lead were going to be published that same day. But most newspapers get printed overnight and distributed the following morning. That means that a reader who picks up the paper Tuesday morning and reads that the fire occurred "this morning" will inaccurately assume that "this morning" means "Tuesday morning." To avoid this problem, you have to write the lead - and, indeed, the entire story - so that it will be accurate when read during the reader's time frame: "Fire destroyed a house on Main Street early Monday morning."

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Rule #2: The lead's first verb should express the main "what" of the story and should be placed among the lead's first seven words.

- Example: "Fire destroyed a house on Main Street early Monday morning."
  - The verb "destroyed" expresses the main "what" of the story.
  - "Destroyed" is the lead's second word -- a position that puts "destroyed" well in front of "Street," the lead's seventh word.
  - Again, notice that the word count includes even little words like "a" and "on."
  - There are no other verbs in front of "destroyed," so "destroyed" is the lead's first verb.
  - Following this rule will force you to quickly tell readers what the story is about.

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Rule #3: The lead's first verb — the same one that expresses the main "what" of the story — should be active voice, not passive voice.

- A verb is active voice if the verb's subject did, is doing, or will do something.
  - Example: "Fire destroyed a house on Main Street early Monday morning."
  - "Destroyed" is the verb.
  - "Fire" is the verb's subject.
  - "Fire" did something. It destroyed.
- A verb is passive voice if the verb's subject had, is having, or will have something done to it.
  - Example: "A house was destroyed by fire on Main Street early Monday morning."
  - "Was" is the verb.
  - "House" is the verb's subject.
  - "House" had something done to it. It "was destroyed."

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Rule #4: If there's a "who" involved in the story, the lead should give some indication of who the "who" is.

- First example: "An elderly Murfreesboro man died Monday when an early morning fire raged through his Main Street home."
  - The "who" is "an elderly Murfreesboro man."
  - In this case, the "who" probably isn't someone whose name readers would recognize.
  - As a result, the "who" angle of the lead focuses on what things about the "who" might make the "who" important to the reader. In this case, it's the fact that the man was older and lived in Murfreesboro. That's called writing a "blind lead." The man's name will be given later in the story.
- Second example: "Murfreesboro Mayor Joe Smith died Monday when an early morning fire raged through his Main Street home."
  - Smith is the local mayor, and most readers probably will recognize his name.
  - As a result, the lead gives his name.

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Rule #5: The lead should summarize the "why" and "how" of the story, but only if there's room.

- Example: "An elderly Murfreesboro man died early Monday morning when fire sparked by faulty wiring raged through his Main Street home."
  - "... fire ... raged through his Main Street home ..." explains why the man died.
  - "... sparked by faulty wiring ..." explains how the blaze began.

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Rule #6: If what's in the lead needs to be attributed, place the attribution at the end of the lead.

- Example: "Faulty wiring most likely sparked the blaze that claimed the life of an elderly Murfreesboro man last week, the city's arson investigator concluded Monday."
  - Attribution is simply a reference indicating the source of some bit of information.
  - In this case, the attribution is the phrase, "the city's arson investigator concluded Monday."
  - Generally, attribute assertions that represent anything other than objective, indisputable information.
    - Here, there should be no doubt in anyone's mind that the man is dead, that his house was destroyed, that it all happened early Monday morning, and that he house was on Main Street.
    - But the arson investigator's assertion that faulty wiring caused the blaze represents the investigator's opinion (based, of course, upon his training and expertise - but an opinion nonetheless). Therefore, the assertion needs to be attributed to the investigator so readers can decide how credible the assertion is.

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Revise your original lead to follow these guidelines

- Rule #1: A straight news lead should be a single paragraph consisting of a single sentence, should contain no more than 30 words, and should summarize, at minimum, the most newsworthy "what," "where" and "when" of the story.
- Rule #2: The lead's first verb should express the main "what" of the story and should be placed among the lead's first seven words.
- Rule #3: The lead's first verb — the same one that expresses the main "what" of the story — should be active voice, not passive voice.
- Rule #4: If there's a "who" involved in the story, the lead should give some indication of who the "who" is.
- Rule #5: The lead should summarize the "why" and "how" of the story, but only if there's room.
- Rule #6: If what's in the lead needs to be attributed, place the attribution at the end of the lead.

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Next, try to assemble the rest of this information into a story using inverted pyramid style:

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