

## Summary Leads + the 5 W's + H

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A **summary lead generally tops** a traditional form of writing called **an inverted pyramid**, in which the news is stacked in paragraphs in order of descending order. The lead summarizes the principal items of a news event... **Inverted pyramid puts the climax of the story at the beginning**, in the lead, and so it is **different from** a form often used for **novels, short stories and drama—and for some news features**—in which an author begins with background and works to a climax. The **form lets readers grasp the news quickly**.

**A summary lead tells an audience the most important** of the six primary elements of an event, the 5 W's and H. They are:

- **Who** the event happened to, or who acted on whom
- **What** happened or will happen
- **Where** the action happened
- **When** it happened
- **Why** the action took place; the reason behind it
- **How** it happened

Once identified, **the five W's and H must be rated according to their importance**. The following principles help determine this ranking.

- **Conduct Research.** If possible, do not cover a news event without researching the subject and the people involved. That will make it easier to spot the freshest news, the key elements that have been reported before and the embellishments.
- **Try to identify the Five W's and H during the reporting process.** A news story is based on six primary elements; look and listen for them. While taking notes, highlight them with an asterisk. Underline or put a double asterisk on those that are most important.
- **Talk to Editors.** They will often say what direction they want a story to take.

**A Multiple Element Lead** is a lead that gives two or more of the primary elements of a news story equal rating and informs an audience that more than one major event is occurring.

**Writing a Summary Lead.** The general rule to follow when writing a summary lead is: Use a single sentence of no more than 35 words to summarize an event.

*Two women were injured and part of Michigan Avenue was closed Saturday when a fire at a high-rise construction site set off a series of explosions that sent debris flying across the Magnificent Mile.*

**Determining the Focal Point.** A report focuses a primary lead choosing which of the W's and H to emphasize. **If a well-known person** or someone who has been in the news is involved in a story, **who becomes the focal point of the lead**. In this case the lead would probably start with a name.

If **where, when, why and how** are the most important elements one of them should be the focal point.

- **When** – a period of activity (from December to February)
- **Where** – an area affected (Toronto's Sars outbreak)
- **Why** – a reason for change (leaving a job, changing strategies)
- **How** – an explanation for an event (cause of a fire)

**Positioning the Time Element.** The when of a story is an important part of the lead because it conveys immediacy to the reader. It needs to be placed so that it does not disturb the flow of a sentence.

- **Option 1: Time Element after the Verb**— A senior citizen was killed Monday...
- **Option 2: Time Element after the Object** may follow the object of the verb—Firefighters in Oregon battled a forest fire Monday

- **Option 3: Time Element after an Adverb or Prepositional Phrase**—Interest rates rose slightly Monday
- **Option 4: Time Element in a Comfortable Spot** –Sometimes the time element cannot follow the verb directly because it reads awkwardly in that position. Therefore, it must be moved to a comfortable position. The Colorado Springs City Council on Tuesday approved the route of an electrical transmission line...
- **Option 5: Time Element at the End** –A dog used to guard a junk yard in Pierrefonds was given an award of courage last Monday.

Writing in the Active Voice Whenever possible, write summary leads in the active voice rather than the passive voice. In the active voice the subject acts upon an object; in the passive voice the subject is acted upon. Editors consider the active voice more direct and vigorous than the passive voice.

- Rescuers saved a young pup...
- Three fires rampaged...

The passive voice should be used only when the person or thing receiving the action is more important than the person or thing doing the acting.

- Five demonstrators were arrested
- Dawson Students were told Monday that they would get free ice cream...

**Providing Attribution:** Attribution tells an audience who gave information to a reporter. It adds a further authenticity and authority to a story. An audience looks at or hears what the sources say and then evaluates the worth of their statements. There are three guidelines to follow in deciding to use attribution in summary leads.

**Attributing Facts:** Attribution is not needed when a fact—something that actually happened—is obviously true. Eg. An argument that began in a shooting.

**Attributing Opinions:** Attribution is needed when a reporting is repeating the voiced opinion of a source, and usually identifies the source by name. Eg. Contemporary movies about teens distort the reality of young people's lives, says psychologist Tom Timmins.

**Vague Attributions:** Vague attributions can be used if a source is speaking on behalf of a government agency. Eg. Hard drug use is on the rise, warns a spokesperson for the Federal Drug Enforcement Agency.

### Revising the Lead

Summary Leads should do two things:

1. Summarize the Story
2. Invite the Reader Inside

The trick to writing a summary lead that summarizes and entices, rather than one that simply wraps up the story, is to continue working on the lead until the best possible combination of words is used.

- Do not go with the first lead
- Avoid superfluous words
- Avoid gobbledegook
- Write clearly and concisely
- Use vivid verbs
- Use colorful words

Compare:

- Women are likely to be disappointed in their choice of a permanent mate, a study shows.
- Women want permanent mates who are sensitive, self-assured and warm, but they usually come up cold, a sociologist's report shows.