Leads – Tips, Dos and Don’ts
from The Radical Write by Bobby Hawthorne

GET OFF TO A GOOD START

You must hook the reader right off. The opening sentence is critical. Compare your leads to these.

SOME KIDS don’t know what it’s like to sit down for a Thanksgiving dinner. They’ve never enjoyed turkey and dressing. Never watched Macy’s parade. Never cheered for the Cowboys and the Lions.

Knowing this breaks Bill Brassard’s heart. That’s why Brassard will again this year open his home to homeless children...

JIMMY JONES leaves school each day at noon, drives across town and spends his afternoons flushing radiators, cleaning carburetors and changing spark plugs. He wants to be an automotive mechanic after graduation. But if Gov. Frank Keatings’ plans were implemented now, Jimmy would spend his afternoons on campus, studying Shakespeare and geography.

IN PARTS OF AFRICA, India and the Philippines, some children have never seen nor held a book. Former biology teacher Jeff Thorne is trying to change that. Now a director with Books for Children, an Oklahoma City charity organization, Thorne returned to Guthrie in February to talk about his experiences overseas and his efforts to help educate children in Third World countries.

THE ROOF LEAKS. Band uniforms are old, and the computers are outdated. The intercom crackles and breaks. The air conditioning in half of the high school rarely works. The restrooms at Jelma Stadium are...well, to put it politely, a challenge to anyone daring to enter.

And there’s more. Not surprisingly, school administrators say they plan to present a school bond proposal next year that will address these needs and others.

HOW TO FIND YOUR LEAD

Based on Donald Murray’s “30 Questions to Produce Leads” these questions will launch you toward your perfect lead.

- What’s your single most interesting or important piece of information?
- When you were researching the story, what interested you the most?
- Did someone tell you an interesting story that symbolizes the issue or person?
- Do you remember a dominant emotion or image?
- What is the central event in the story?
- Do you remember a dominant sensory detail: smell, feel, taste, sound or image?
- Tension: what’s the problem?
- Conflict: Can you boil the issue down to one-on-one conflict?
- Ask yourself: so what? Then, explain it to your reader.
- Is the setting important? If so, why?
- What caused this situation?
- What’s the story’s tone: kind, obnoxious, quizzical, satirical, skeptical, etc.?
- Do you have a single quote that captures the essence of the story?
- What’s the most important: who, what, when, where, why or how?
- What’s the best way to tell the story chronologically?
- Can you and if so, have you given the story a human face?
- Have you told the story through the most interesting character’s eyes?
- What are the problems in the story? Have they been solved?
- What can the reader leave from these people’s experiences?
- When will the story run?
- How much space do you have?
MORE LEADS WE SEE WAY TOO OFTEN

Leads that waddle into the story. For example: Riverside’s tennis team competed in the Pine Valley Tournament last weekend. Capturing the boys’ singles title was Brad Gunter.

A much better lead would have been: Using a booming serve, Brad Gunter whipped Jefferson’s David Jones 6-3, 6-2 to capture the Pine Valley Tennis Tournament singles title Saturday.

The results are the news—not that there was a competition. In the same space, the second lead gives far more information than the first. Notice how the lead of this story answers “how.”

Don’t state the obvious: “Football season is here again” or “The purpose of the Student Council is . . . is to . . .”

WEBSTER LEADS

Avoid leading with dictionary definitions such as “Webster defines maniac as . . .” They are a sure sign that the writer has made no effort to use an interesting lead.

CHATTY LEADS

More often than not, these result in editorializing. For example:

“One of the fastest growing as well as friendliest clubs in school is the Young Historians Club.”

It is not the job of the reporter to assign labels (good or bad) to organizations or persons. Another example:

There is a wonderful and much needed new organization here at school. It’s SAVE (Students Against Violating the Earth). Just what is SAVE, you ask? Well, it’s a youth organization whose purpose is to get students involved in improving the environment.

WHAT EVERYBODY ALREADY KNOWS LEAD

It’s spring, and that means the arrival of golf season. Golf is a game played on a course with nine or 18 holes. The object of the game is to strike the ball with a club and get it to roll into a little cup in the ground. By the way, we have a golf team right here at our school!

A GOOD LEAD CAN CREATE SUSPENSE

You want to hook readers with a provocative lead that will pull them into the story. One of my favorite leaders: Minutes before the meeting began, Bill Farney got the bad news. Another good one: She never knew she had it.

LABEL LEADS

A label lead generally begins with the name of a club, class, team, or person. For example:

This year’s Cowbell High School Chess Club will . . . .

Another form of label lead begins with a prepositional phrase answering the news question “when” (such as, “On Tuesday, the Pep Squad . . . .”).

The story should begin with the most interesting and most important information. Label leads never provide this information.