

Elm Tips: Ledes

A lede should:

- Contain the essence of the story. What is this story about, thematically, and why should we care? Think of the lede as Part Two of the headline.
- Communicate the key information. Journalistic tradition would classify this data under “the five W’s and one H”: Who, What, Where, When, Why and How. This system is useful to the writing of any story, but a lede that contains all these points will often be overwrought – “St. Penelope’s Boys’ School Chancellor Bob Tompkins presented his resignation to Senate on Wednesday due to allegations of chronic alcoholism made by Head Boy Mike Foss during last January’s intramural Debating Club championship”.
- A snappy summary or a teaser is more likely to draw the reader in – “St. Penelope’s Bob Tompkins finally kicked the chancellorship habit on Wednesday, after months of rumours about his private life.” The details come in the next few paragraphs. This approach highlights the priorities of the story and makes for better writing.
- Capture the imagination. A lede should raise questions, not just provide information. Otherwise we might be content with the factoid and stop reading. The Why of those five W’s is always more complex than can be spelled out in a paragraph. If your lede opens a window onto the complexities, we’ll feel challenged instead of patronized.
- Set mood and tone. Ledes can be intimate or cold, tragic or hilarious, hard-hitting or celebratory. One of these choices will be right for your story, and a mismatch might be deadly.
- Point the way towards an interpretation, without insulting the reader’s intelligence. Whatever you put first in the story will determine how we read the rest of it. “St. Penelope’s long-time leader was driven out of office this week” will frame a very different story than “The scandal-ridden reign of Bob Tompkins finally crash-landed on Wednesday.”
- Be appropriate to the audience. Your lede might contain a different idea if your publication is geared primarily towards science students, or towards gays and lesbians, than if it’s a general-audience newspaper – eg., “The chemistry department lost a strong advocate Wednesday when Chancellor Bob Tompkins resigned his post,” or, “Bob Tompkins resigned on Wednesday, to the pleasure of campus queers who considered the former chancellor an apologist for St. Penelope’s anti-gay policies.”
- Be as concise as possible. Don’t stall the reader with peripheral elements – “On Wednesday, at the third Senate meeting this year, the chancellor of St. Penelope’s, Bob Tompkins, rose to present his resignation.” Instead, make the lede an active, dynamic agent.
- Use short and simple sentences. Mainstream journalism prescribes a maximum 25 to 30 words for a lede. You can loosen it up a bit, but make sure your lede maintains its momentum.

TYPES OF LEDES

SUMMARY LEDE: tries to cram as much of the “five W’s and an H” into a single sentence as possible. It is also known as the standard lede, and is used for standard inverted-pyramid news. E.g., “Jean Chrétien intends to fight urban poverty by rounding up all the drug dealers in Canada and locking them in small steel boxes, the prime minister told the Alberta Chamber of Commerce in a campaign speech in Red Deer last night.”

SINGLE-ITEM LEDE: concentrates on just one or two of these elements for a bigger punch. E.g., “Jean Chrétien has warned the nation’s drug dealers they won’t breathe easy if he’s re-elected.”

QUOTE LEDE: uses a dramatic quotation, usually from one of your sources, to launch the story. This should be used sparingly, and only when the quote is fantastic. Often paraphrasing the quote, as in the first example above, will be more effective — most people do not speak in soundbites. E.g., “I say we stick those evil satanist negro child-abuser pushers where the sun don’t shine.”

“A red-faced Jean Chrétien shouted these words to the Alberta Chamber of Commerce last night, justifying his plan to “lock all the drug dealers in Canada in tiny metal boxes and throw away the keys.”

CARTRIDGE LEDE: uses one word or short phrase as a teaser for the rest of the lede. This usually seems gimmicky and, again, should be used sparingly. E.g., “Sardine tins. “That’s what Jean Chrétien intends to use to contain the drug problem and cure urban ills.

QUESTION LEDE: poses a question to the reader, which the story proceeds to answer. Occasionally the source of an amusing riddle, but more often confusing and counterproductive to the average news story. E.g., “How can we prevent crime, solve urban poverty and stimulate the steel industry all at the same time? “Jean Chrétien’s answer might disturb some Canadians.” (or, alternatively, “Has Jean Chrétien finally lost it?”)

ANALOGY LEDE: makes a comparison between the issue or event at hand and something more familiar. Usually the fruit of inspiration, this kind of lede either works or it doesn’t. E.g., “Civil libertarians fear that Jean Chrétien’s prescription for drug abuse could make the War Measures Act look lax.”

A popular type of analogy lede is the Janus-faced lede, in which you look back into the past and/or forward into the future for comparison with the event or issue in question.

DISTINCTIVE INCIDENT, PICTURE OR CONTRAST LEDE: uses an anecdote or image, or contrasting images, to illustrate the point of the story. Often brings in a human element, and gives the story personality, specificity and colour. A good way to improve stilted news style, and to highlight ironies.

E.g., “While Jean Chrétien addressed them last night, the members of the Alberta Chamber of Commerce finished off their dinner wines and started in on dessert cocktails.

Some enjoyed fine cigars or puffed on long cigarettes as they smiled at the prime minister's words.

“And when Chrétien promised to lock up every last drug dealer in the nation, the assembled tobacco company execs and beer wholesalers rose to their feet to applaud.” This kind of lede requires a bit more space to stretch out in. In one draft of this paper, for example, I tried to write a lede using “real characters” to depict the economic benefits drug dealing can bring to depressed neighbourhoods, contrasted with Chrétien's righteousness. But it took so much room it would have had to be a feature. Also, if overused or overdone, this style of writing can become precious or sentimental.

COSMIC LEDE: I'm only telling you about this one so you can make sure you don't use it. A cosmic lede makes some grand sweeping statement about an issue (or about life itself) as a way of introducing the subject. It's a pretentious, lazy way to write, particularly endemic to bad arts writing. The only way I can imagine this sort of lede working is as parody.

Bad e.g., “When politicians talk about drugs, the subject stirs many emotions and conjures up competing ideas of good and evil.”

Better e.g., “When politicians talk about drugs, you sometimes have to wonder if they're stoned.”

LEDE TIPS

- The lede doesn't have to be the first thing you write. In fact, wrestling with a lede can either prevent you from getting the story done on time or misguide you in how you slant the story. If a lede doesn't trip off your typewriter, wait until you've finished the core of the story, figure out an angle, then try again.
- Meetings, speeches, demonstrations, news conferences and the like are usually not news. The decisions or issues raised at them are news, and that's what should appear in your lede.
- The first part of your story does not have to correspond to the chronological first event. Start with the point, then fill in the background.
- Make sure you attribute opinions in your lede. But don't clutter the lede with over-identification — use either the name or the job title, and then use the other label in the next reference to clarify the attribution. (Lede: “Jean Chrétien said today...” Second sentence: “The prime minister told businessmen that...”)
Alternatively, use a general attribution, like “civil libertarians” above, but make sure you name specific groups or persons in the next couple of paragraphs.
- If at all possible, avoid using the full name of an organization in your lede, particularly if it's a long one. Bureaucratic nomenclature slows down the sentence and turns off the reader. Paraphrase it so the “Alberta Chamber of Commerce, Red Deer Branch” becomes “a group of Red Deer businessmen.” And again, give the full name later.
- As well, never use an acronym or short form in a lede or headline, unless it's a household word like “U.S.” or “CBC.” Introduce acronyms only in the body of the story. (NB: The acronym for your student government is not a household word, even if you print it ten times an issue and use it all the time in the household.)