

Writing the Lead

By Roger Garrison

WRITING SERVICES - UNCW - WESTSIDE HALL, 1ST FLOOR - 962-7857

KEY PROBLEM: How do you write the opening statement, the “introduction” to your piece of writing?

SUGGESTION: You write a lead which gives the reader the scope, direction, and tone of the whole article or essay or narrative.

Here are a dozen types of leads, listed in the order of popularity in large, general circulation magazines:

1. **THE ANECDOTE LEAD:** An anecdote lead is a brief story, usually with a point (like a joke). This lead is especially adapted for personality sketches or personal experience.
2. **THE STRIKING STATEMENT LEAD:** Designed to rouse the reader by startling him or her, or “grabbing” his or her attention with an arresting statement.
3. **THE NARRATIVE LEAD:** This differs from the anecdote principally because it does not necessarily have a climax or a “point.” It’s like “once upon a time.”
4. **THE QUESTION LEAD:** One or more questions which lead naturally into the body of the writing.
5. **SUMMARY OR SUMMARY STATEMENT:** A few sentences or a short paragraph summarize what the rest of the piece of writing develops.
6. **THE QUOTATION LEAD:** Often, appropriate quotations are useful starters; can be one or more quotations, usually short.
7. **DIRECT ADDRESS:** We always like to be talked to directly. So use “you” in the lead. If that “you” can be brought in without preaching or chiding the reader, it can be most effective.
8. **THE ANALOGY:** A comparison—often an image—used to describe. Example: “A French philosopher once said that American society was like a glass of beer—foam on top, dregs on the bottom, but clear, settled brew in the middle.”
9. **DESCRIPTIVE LEAD:** The old saying, “I’ll draw you a picture” has sense when applied to a lead. Vivid description, usually brief (not more than a paragraph or at most two), of a character, place, or situation, can get the reader off to a good start. A lead of this type should be filled with specific images, as well as facts.
10. **GENERAL STATEMENT:** Example: “The brewing of strong drink is as old as man himself.”
11. **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:** Usually for “how to” articles. You simply begin by saying what you’re going to write about. Example: “There are some special things that every nurse needs to know about caring for heavily sedated patients. Here, from my experience, are some of the most important.”
12. **NEWS LEAD:** Found in almost every straight news story: WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, AND HOW.