Tips for Writing Good Leads

* **Start strong.** ALWAYS remember the importance of a good lead. Why bother writing a story if the lead won’t draw readers in?
* **Keep it short and punchy.** Read it out loud. A limit of 25 words or less is about right.
* **Be accurate.** A lead can *sound* great, but *be* wrong. If it’s wrong, it’s wrong, no matter how good the writing is.
* **Stay in the active voice.** Use power words: active verbs and strong nouns. Go with the present tense if you can.
* **Be creative.** Almost any approach can work well if it sets the proper tone and indicates what the story is about.

**Ask these questions:**

1. What would make me want to read this story? Or, what would make my friends interested in this story?
2. Who cares? Why would anyone read this story? Write it to the people who care. Those are the readers for this story.
3. So what? What does it mean for the readers?
4. What is the ONE thing the readers need to know about this?
5. What would make a reader turn and say, “Listen to this!” [In journalism, this is called a “Hey, Mabel.” As in: “Hey, Mabel, did you know …” or “Hey, Mabel, can you believe …”)
6. What surprised me when I was reporting on this story? What did you learn that you never knew before?
7. How will I end this story? Sometimes knowing where you’re going to end up will help you get started.
8. What will the headline be?
9. Is there an image or detail that shows the meaning of the story?
10. Is there an anecdote or incident or action that captures the essence of the story?
11. Where’s the conflict?
12. Can I put a face on this by telling it from the point of view of one person?
13. What’s the setting? Is the scene impressive enough to draw readers in?

**Checklist for leads**

*(From the Texas Association of Journalism Educators)*

1. Does the first word or phrase tell the most important idea in the story?
2. Is the “who” of the story told, with the full name and descriptive title included?
3. Is the “what” or “what happened” up-to-date, emphasizing the “today” or a future angle if at all possible?
4. Are the questions when and where answered in the lead or bridge, but subordinated to more important information?
5. Are the how and why elements given a prominent place in the lead if they apply to the story?
6. Is the lead is too long? Has it been broken into two sentences or paragraphs for emphasis and easier reading?