

WRITING A LEDE

Your audience will greatly increase with the right lede for your newspaper article. Listed below are ways to improve your lede writing.

What is a lede?

A **lede** is the first sentence of your writing. It is also spelled “**lead**”—both are accepted spellings and pronounced “LEED,” but the spelling of “lede” was adapted to avoid confusion with the metal lead, which was once used in the printing process. Depending on whether you’re writing a hard or soft story, a lede should reflect the content of your article. You wouldn’t write

School’s out a little early this summer

if your article was about a bomb threat to a local middle school. Consider both your audience and your newspaper.

Remember: a sensational lede (one that exaggerates events and facts and uses bad word play) may get what you write noticed, but in a bad way. Yellow journalism, journalism that uses sensationalism and cheap thrills to attract readers, is worse than clichés.

The basics of a lede

A lede is one sentence of 35 words or less and may contain one comma. Some journalists use a semi-colon to join two independent clauses together in one lede. **This is bad style.** Remember: say as much as you can in the least number of words possible. Do not use a question, a quotation, or a cliché (an overused expression) for your lede. These are cutesy tricks that beginner journalists often use, and these overused tricks reflect the journalist’s inexperience.

Remember: Always write in the active, and not the passive, voice! Something happening to someone is not news. Someone doing something is news.



EXERCISE 1

Write a lede for the following news ideas. Remember to distinguish between hard and soft news.

(The Prime Minister announces his retirement)

(A colour theorist predicts what hues will be used by designers in the fall)

(The Saint Patrick's Day parade is accidentally rerouted)

(Digital pets are back in demand)



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What is the difference between hard and soft news?

Hard news is breaking news. It can be timely and might be ongoing. A crime story or suspected arson are examples of hard news. Most newspapers are composed of hard news stories.

Soft news is more relaxed. It is entertainment, fashion, and lifestyle news, as well as opinion columns and editorials. Here, puns and writing in the first person can be used because there is more time to tell a story. H. L. Mencken, a famous American journalist, described journalism as being “literature in a hurry.” This is especially reflective of soft news.

What is the difference between a hard lede and a soft lede?

A **hard lede** sums up a news story. It gives the most amount of information—the who, what, when, where, why, and how, known as the **5 Ws and one H**—that is relevant to the core of the story in as few words as possible. However, be wary of what the Canadian Press style book calls the “grab bag lede,” where journalists try to cram every detail they think is relevant to the story in the lede. While this seems like a good thing, in reality it is just overkill.

Twenty-two planes are being detained at Pearson due to the largest bomb threat in the airport’s history.

A **soft lede** is more narrative—it sets the scene for the story that lies ahead. A soft lede can be a delayed lede: you can take your time in introducing the reader to what you’re writing about, and you have more leeway to include more than the 5 Ws and one H.

Michael Krawczynski has an unusual Saturday morning routine. Instead of the usual sugary cereal and hours of retro cartoons, the 17-year-old Ryerson High student, along with other teenagers and young adults, runs through alleys, bounces off walls, and jumps from rooftop to rooftop. Krawczynski and his friends are doing more than letting off steam: they are practising the art of parkour, a French philosophical movement and high-



impact activity that . . .

EXERCISE 2

Shorten or rewrite the following ledes. The first exercise has been done for you.

Prime Minister Smith announced today he will visit the Northwest Territories, Manitoba, Labrador, and Prince Edward Island, before setting off for a month-long vacation in Hawaii. And he's going to do it in the next five days.

Prime Minister Smith announced today he will visit one territory and three provinces in the upcoming workweek before vacationing.

1-Deborah Harrison began the morning as she always did: an egg-white omelette with a cup of coffee, followed by light stretching and an early morning 5k run through Allen Gardens. But this morning would be different: amidst the rose bushes and crab grass was the body of John Thomas.

2-Why did the Member of Parliament cross the road?

3-The bigger sports players become, the harder they fall.



4-“This morning, I had breakfast with Elvis,” said MP John Turner.

5-Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn are local wayward boys and pranksters; however, with reports of their drowning in the Mississippi river, have they played their last prank?

What other kinds of ledes are there?

A **delayed** or **indirect lede** is a soft news lede. Like soft news, it is “literature in a hurry,” meaning there is room for more literary techniques. Writers can have a lot of fun with a delayed lede, such as playing with words, narrating with attention to visualisation, and telling a story as opposed to laying out facts, which are all part of soft news writing.

A **direct lede** is also known as a hard news lede. It is 35 words with one comma, using the 5Ws and one H and news pegs where necessary.

A **summary lede** may seem like an easy lede to write, but it can actually be quite difficult. It is necessary to find the most important point of a news article and summarize it in the lede without sacrificing important details.

A **multiple element lede** is a lede that contains more than one story. These types of ledes are to be used as little as possible, as they can sometimes be confusing to read.



A **grab bag lede** is a multiple element lede gone wrong. Here, the writer has tried to include too many ideas in the lede, resulting in a disorganized mess.

EXERCISE 3

Write a delayed lede for the following soft news ideas.

1-The Writing Centre’s book club is increasing the amount of books it reads during a school term.

2-(A previously unknown opera written by Richard Wagner has been discovered)

3-The Tour de France is celebrating its 95th anniversary.

4-The University of Guelph-Humber’s plant wall wins first prize at a gardening



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competition



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