

The Humble News Release (III)

by Tim Dunne

Writing the "Dateline"

The dateline gives the point of origin (*location*) of the story, date and sometimes credit to the agency making the release. It appears as the preliminary part of the lead, and if received from another source or written for external release, it will usually have a dateline.

The simplest dateline is written for external release—

SCOTT'S BAY, NS, Feb. 19 - A volunteer search and rescue specialist saved the life of a six year-old child yesterday by carrying her up the cliffs of Cape Split faster than the rising Fundy tide.

Note that the specific location (SCOTT'S BAY) is written in all caps. If "Nova Scotia" were written in full, perhaps for an international audience, it would be in written in upper and lower case ("up and down" style).

The Lead Paragraph

The *lead*, or opening paragraph, is critical to the success of the news release. It "sells" the rest of the story, and if it doesn't capture the reader's (ie: the editor's) interest, it may not be considered for publication or assignment to a reporter for further research.

The normal practice among professionals of institutional writing is to prepare a lead paragraph that is one sentence long, comprising about 30 words (or less, if possible), that sets the tone or paints a picture for the subject of the news release. The lead should be impersonal, without expressing an editorial opinion, and arouse interest in reading the remainder of the release.

Of course, these are guidelines and not strict rules. There are subjects that will not lend themselves to these conventions, and the only actual solid rule is that no guideline should interfere with readability.

The classically good lead paragraph is drawn from the answers to the six (or seven) questions:

- Who?
- What?
- When?
- Where?
- Why?
- How?

- (and sometimes) How much?

This formula is nicknamed "The 5 dubs H" for "The five W's and H."

News leads can take whatever form the writer feels may be most effective. They can be "descriptive," can take the form of "contrast," may ask a "question," or may make a statement with "impact." But in each case, it takes the most important element of the story and makes it the subject of, and at the front of, the lead. While it is becoming commonplace for journalists to use single words and phrases as attention-getting leads, this newsletter feels that in all cases, however, the professional writer should use full sentences that follow the traditional conventions of language and composition.

The following example shows how the various lead elements can take the emphasis in a lead:

WHO? - A volunteer search and rescue specialist saved the life of a six year-old child yesterday by carrying her up the cliffs of Cape Split faster than the rising Fundy tide.

OR - A volunteer search and rescue specialist snatched another world-be drowning victim from the Fundy high tide yesterday by carrying a six year-old girl up the Cape Split cliffs with the tide in close pursuit.

NOTE: This is an impersonal "who" lead, which is used when the person is not well-known. If the subject or the victim were a prominent person, then that person would be identified and take prominence in the lead, such as, "Former provincial premier John ...," or "President of the Downtown Merchants Association Elizabeth ...".

WHAT? - A drowning was prevented yesterday when a volunteer search and rescue specialist carried a six year-old boy up the Cape Split cliffs faster than the rising Fundy high tide.

OR - Fundy's famous high tide was denied another victim yesterday when a volunteer search and rescue specialist carried a six year-old girl up the Cape Split cliffs with the tide in close pursuit.

WHEN? - At high tide yesterday, a six year-old child was saved from drowning when a volunteer search and

Mnemonic Aid -- The “bridge” WAITS

- Ws** - (or how) not in the lead.
- A** - attribution
- I** - identification
- T** - Tie -back to a previous story.
- S** - Secondary facts.

rescue worker carried her up the Cape Split cliffs before they could be caught by dangerous tides.

WHERE? – Cape Split was the site of a daring rescue yesterday when a volunteer search and rescue worker carried a six year-old girl up the Cape Split cliffs before they could be caught by rising waters.

WHY? – The need to save a young girl’s life prompted a volunteer search and rescue specialist to scale down the Cape Split cliffs to get her to safety ahead of the Fundy high tide.

HOW? – Using his training as a volunteer search and rescue specialist, a young man carried a six year-old girl up the Cape Split cliffs to save her from drowning.

As noted above, normally the lead is a single sentence within a single paragraph, but sometimes this simply is not possible as it might compromise readability when there is just too much information. The writer should then divide the information into another sentence or another paragraph, whichever makes it more interesting to read.

Whatever device the writer uses for the lead, it must meet the reader’s initial curiosity and prompt him/her to read further.

Writing the Bridge

The Bridge is simply the transition from the lead to the main body of the news release or news story to allow the reader to move comfortably to the presentation of details that comprise the remainder of the story – a lead-to-body link. After writing a summary lead, the writer looks over his facts and decides what items will be in the bridge. This second part of a news story is normally one or two paragraphs.

The bridge can serve one or more of five major functions, depending on the summary lead written for the story.

Any ‘W’s not included in the lead: Include any of the “5 dub H” elements not included in the lead paragraph.

One of the functions of the bridge is to explain other Ws or H not included in the lead. For example, the amount of detail required to explain why an event happened may have preempted including the “WHY”

in the lead, then it could logically be presented in the bridge.

For example: (**lead paragraph**) The School Board yesterday postponed until its regular Thursday meeting a decision on whether to pay \$14,250 an acre for a 42-acre tract as the site for the new St. Crispins High School.

(**Bridge**) Board members complained they were given insufficient time to consider the proposal saying that they didn’t receive notice of the special meeting until yesterday morning.

Attribution: Another function of the bridge is to give attribution to those leads which, by their nature demand such attribution. Attribution gives the sources (*who said it*) or authority (*directives, regulations, sources, etc...*)

For example: (Lead paragraph) Nova Scotia’s Law Amendments Committee met last evening to finalize details for new legislation to finalize legislation that will increase worker safety at jobsites within the province.

(Bridge) This legislation began as a private member’s bill introduced into the provincial legislature by Opposition labour critic William Rikker three months ago.

Identification: A third function of the bridge is to provide complete identification after an **impersonal who** lead. Complete identification means full name, rank (for military, police and Coast Guard), age, title or occupation. (A word of caution – addresses and identification of family or next of kin information is normally not appropriate for release, contingent on the subject of the report.

Example: (Lead paragraph) A volunteer search and rescue specialist saved the life of a six year-old child yesterday by carrying her up the cliffs of Cape Split faster than the rising Fundy tide.

(Bridge paragraph) Ms. Helen Gendron, a long-time volunteer with the Halifax Search and Rescue organization and participant in numerous searches, received the heart-felt thanks from the little girl’s family for her daring rescue.

Tie back: A fourth function of the bridge is to give the reader a recap or tie-back to an earlier story on the same subject. The writer must never assume that his readers have read the first version of the story. Therefore a tie-back is necessary to put the reader in a proper perspective.

Secondary facts: A fifth function of the bridge is to bring out additional information which is not a lead element, but complements the lead. (to be continued)

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