

These, for example, are the opening sentences of two newspaper columns:

On Feb. 11, Terry Shapiro put "Bambi" on the VCR, picked up a pistol and fired five bullets into her sleeping husband's body.

(Kathleen Parker)

'Twas the night before Christmas when Gerald Williams shot his wife, Alice, in the head.

(Clarence Page)

Similarly, these are the opening sentences in two books:

The small boys came early to the hanging.

(Ken Follett, "The Pillars of the Earth")

On the 26th of July, my best friend decided he wanted to kill me.

(Wyatt Wyatt, "Deep in the Heart")

CHECKLIST FOR WRITING LEADS

Use the following checklist to evaluate all the leads you write:

1. Be specific rather than vague and abstract.
2. Avoid stating the obvious or the negative.
3. Emphasize your story's most unusual or unexpected developments.
4. Emphasize your story's most interesting and important developments.
5. Emphasize your story's magnitude and its impact on its participants and readers.
6. Use complete sentences, the proper tense and all the necessary articles—"a," "an" and "the."
7. Be concise. If it exceeds three typed lines, examine a lead critically to determine whether it is wordy or repetitious or contains some unnecessary details. If so, rewrite it.
8. Avoid writing a label lead that reports your story's topic but not what was said or done about it.
9. Begin your lead with the news—the main point of the story. If you began with attribution or the time and place your story occurred, rewrite it.
10. Use a relatively simple sentence structure, exercising particular care to avoid beginning the lead with a long phrase or clause.
11. Use strong, active and descriptive verbs rather than passive "to be" verbs such as "is," "are," "was" and "were."
12. Make sure every name that appears in the lead is essential. Avoid using in your lead unfamiliar names and names requiring lengthy identification that could be reported in a later paragraph.
13. Attribute any quotation or statement of opinion appearing in the lead.
14. Localize the lead, and emphasize the latest developments, preferably what happened today or yesterday.
15. Eliminate statements of opinion, including one-word labels such as "interesting" and "alert."
16. Justify the use of a two-sentence lead if you used one. Check to be certain it is concise and nonrepetitive.
17. Remember your readers. Write a lead that is clear, concise and interesting, and that emphasizes the details most likely to affect and interest your readers.
18. Read the lead aloud to be certain that it is clear, concise and easy to understand.