

From Once Upon a Time to The End

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Or From The Lead to the Kicker

- Why are beginnings and endings so important?
- How do you get them right every time?
- Keeping readers engaged in the middle
- Examples
- Concrete tips
- The End



Let's start at
the very
beginning

Without a great lead / lede/ intro, a story is doomed.

What is doomed?

0 traffic + 0 time spent = a huge waste of your time

Bottom line: If you want people to read your story, spend time on your lead.

“The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn’t induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead.”

- William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*

Should you write your lead first?

- Some people say if you're struggling to write your lead, just leave it and start writing.
- But if you're struggling with your lead, you're struggling with the point of your story.
- As Poynter writing coach Roy Peter Clark says: Keep asking yourself what the story is really about.
- Write an outline.
- Write your lead.



Some really bad leads

- The meeting began when a quorum was reached.
 - The house on 53rd Street and Huntington Avenue stood motionless. From the south of the building, nothing looked out of the ordinary except for the police barricades that were set up.
 - Be-Leaf it or not (about the Maple Leafs playoff run).
- Compiled by Kristen Hare for Poynter

Leads need
to fit the story
and audience

2 IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

- Is your story news, sports, features?
- How can you give your audience what they need?

News stories

- Are readers in danger, or do they fear they might be?
- Be direct. Answer their questions immediately.
- When the corrections officer and inmate left an Alabama prison for an appointment that didn't exist, local stories described the inmate as armed and dangerous.



Breaking news lead

- Stick to the who, what, where, when, why & how. Keep it simple.

The man in charge of the Indiana BMV has abruptly resigned a month earlier than expected. Gov. Eric Holcomb had previously announced that BMV Commissioner Peter Lacy would step down on May 27, but those plans were cut short Wednesday without any explanation or formal announcement.

- IndyStar

Grab people's attention

An extraordinary news lead.

A 17-year-old boy chased his pet squirrel up a tree in Washington Square Park yesterday afternoon, touching off a series of incidents in which 22 persons were arrested and eight persons, including five policemen were injured.

- **Mark Hawthorne, New York Times, as cited in his obituary**

Grab people's attention

CONTEXT: Gary Johnson ordered fried chicken from a Church's, was told they were out but the worker suggested chicken nuggets. He punched her and ended up being shot dead by a security guard.

LEAD: *Gary Johnson died hungry.*

CONTEXT: A woman was going on a trial for murder conspiracy in the death of her husband, and he wasn't the first to die.

LEAD: *Bad things happen to the husbands of Widow Elkin.*

- Edna Buchanan, Miami Herald crime reporter

President Donald Trump's assault on American democracy began in the spring of 2020, when he issued a flurry of preemptive attacks on the integrity of the country's voting systems. The doubts he cultivated ultimately led to the rampage inside the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, when a pro-Trump mob came within seconds of encountering Vice President Mike Pence, trapped lawmakers and vandalized the home of Congress in the worst desecration of the complex since British forces burned it in 1815. Five people died in the Jan. 6 attack or in the immediate aftermath, and 140 police officers were assaulted.

The consequences of that day are still coming into focus, but what is already clear is that the insurrection was not a spontaneous act nor an isolated event. It was a battle in a broader war over the truth and over the future of American democracy.

- WaPo staff, 2022 Pulitzer Prize winner in public service journalism

President John F. Kennedy
is dead.

The Weather
Today—Rain, windy and mild with
chance of thunderstorm. High in 60-65
by 8 A.M. Tonight—Rain, cooling, windy
and colder. Low in upper 30s. Friday's
high 60 at 2 p.m.; low, 41 at 6:25 a.m.
Further Sky and Details on Page B4

The Washington Post

Times Herald

The American Language—
A. J. Liebling on p. 1. L. Menck on
New Fiction Reviewed.
Tomorrow, in
BOOK WEEK

66th Year -- No. 353 Phone RE. 7-1234 Copyright © 1963 The Washington Post Co. SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 1963 WTOP-TV (5) Radio (1500) TEN CENTS

President Kennedy Shot Dead; Lyndon B. Johnson Is Sworn In



Body Flown Back Here; Gov. Connally of Texas Wounded by Gunman

By Edward T. Pollard
Staff Reporter

DALLAS, Tex., Nov. 22 — President John F. Kennedy is dead.

He was shot at 12:30 p.m. CST (1:30 EST) today by an assassin, who sent a rifle bullet crashing into his right temple.

The 46-year-old Chief Executive, youngest man ever elected to the highest office and the fourth leader of it to be martyred by an assassin, was shot as he was riding in an open automobile through downtown Dallas.

He never regained consciousness, and was pronounced dead at 7 p.m.

Gov. John B. Connally of Texas, who was riding with the President, sitting just in front of him, was shot twice. One bullet went through his chest. Another fractured his right wrist. His condition was described as "satisfactory."

Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, who is now the 36th President of the United States, was riding three cars behind the President, and was not a target of the assassin.

Johnson Sworn In at Airport

The Texas was sworn in as Mr. Kennedy's successor.



Thousands Feared Dead as World Trade Center Is Toppled



Give this article



By James Barron

Sept. 11, 2001

10 MIN READ

In what appeared to be parallel attacks on quintessential symbols of American financial and military power, hijackers flew jetliners into both towers of the World Trade Center in Manhattan and, less than an hour later, into the Pentagon, outside Washington.

Other types of leads

- **Anecdotal leads:** When talking about the exodus from Ukraine during the early days of the war, focusing on one child.
- **Descriptive leads:** Description of a decimated town in the Ukraine, for instance.
- **Delayed leads:** Often used in features.

Great beginnings

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, not a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.”

- JRR Tolkien, “The Hobbit”

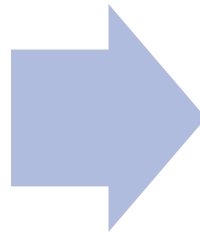
Transitioning from the lead: Example 1

Last night's grief lingers, hanging like a thick quilt over the Intensive Care Unit as nurses start their 12-hour shifts before sunrise.

The middle-aged man's lungs had stiffened slowly since his arrival weeks earlier, coronavirus shallowing his breaths.

Unvaccinated, he'd been placed on a ventilator in an eastern Iowa emergency room and shipped nearly three hours away to Mary Greeley Medical Center, site of the nearest open ICU bed.

He didn't want to be kept alive by machines, he wrote in a living will, but loved ones couldn't fathom withdrawing care. *Keep fighting*, they said. *Keep fighting*.



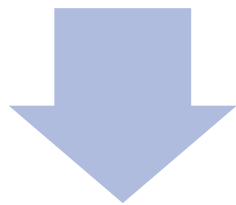
But doctors knew the battle was already lost. The virus ran through his lungs like a forest fire in a dry summer, leaving deep, painful scars scattered like charred stumps and broken branches. Nurses redoubled support, waiting for a sign of progress, hoping a little green might sprout through the blackened remains. A month on, nothing was taking root.

- Courtney Crowder, Des Moines Register

Transitioning from the lead: Example 2

WHEN BOBBY MCILVAINE died on September 11, 2001, his desk at home was a study in plate tectonics, coated in shifting piles of leather-bound diaries and yellow legal pads. He'd kept the diaries since he was a teenager, and they were filled with the usual diary things – longings, observations, frustrations – while the legal pads were marbled with more variety: aphoristic musings, quotes that spoke to him, stabs at fiction.





The yellow pads appeared to have the earnest beginnings of two different novels. But the diaries told a different kind of story. To the outside world, Bobby, 26, was a charmer, a striver, a furnace of ambition. But inside, the guy was a sage and a sap – philosophical about disappointments, melancholy when the weather changed, moony over girlfriends.

Less than a week after his death, Bobby's father had to contend with that pitiless still life of a desk.

- Jennifer Senior, *The Atlantic*, 2022 Pulitzer Prize winner, feature writing

Transitions

Set up: People are on long waitlists for childcare, and sometimes must pay \$50-\$200 just to get on a list. That money is nonrefundable.

- The months- and years-long wait to get into a childcare center, even for parents who get on lists as early as conceivably possible, is one of the most infuriating symptoms of a childcare industry in market failure, still struggling to recover after it was wrecked by the pandemic.
- While almost every industry has returned to pre-pandemic levels, child care is still short 60,000 teachers as of last month.

Tips: Propel readers to the end of the story

- **Look for tension:** Like the diary of the 9/11 victim: Does his former girlfriend still have it? Will we learn what's in it?
- **Keep it clean:** Errors slow people down, muddy the middle, annoy readers. Have someone (anyone!) read your story!
- **Pay attention to beginnings and endings:** This applies to paragraphs and even sentences.
- **Avoid formulaic structures:** This goes for your story and also your sentence structure.
- Transitions!

Concrete tips

- Jot down a quick outline to focus your story.
- Look for leads and endings while researching your story.
- Read great writers: Pulitzer Prize winners and other writing besides news.
- Avoid puns, especially if they will make readers groan.
- Keep it simple.
- Watch for extra words.
- Read your own work out loud.



- After all this effort on the beginning and the middle, don't actually leave the end to the end.
- Plan your ending.
- End in a quote?
- Be careful because you're giving the last word to someone. If the story is controversial, you just picked a side.



A final ending

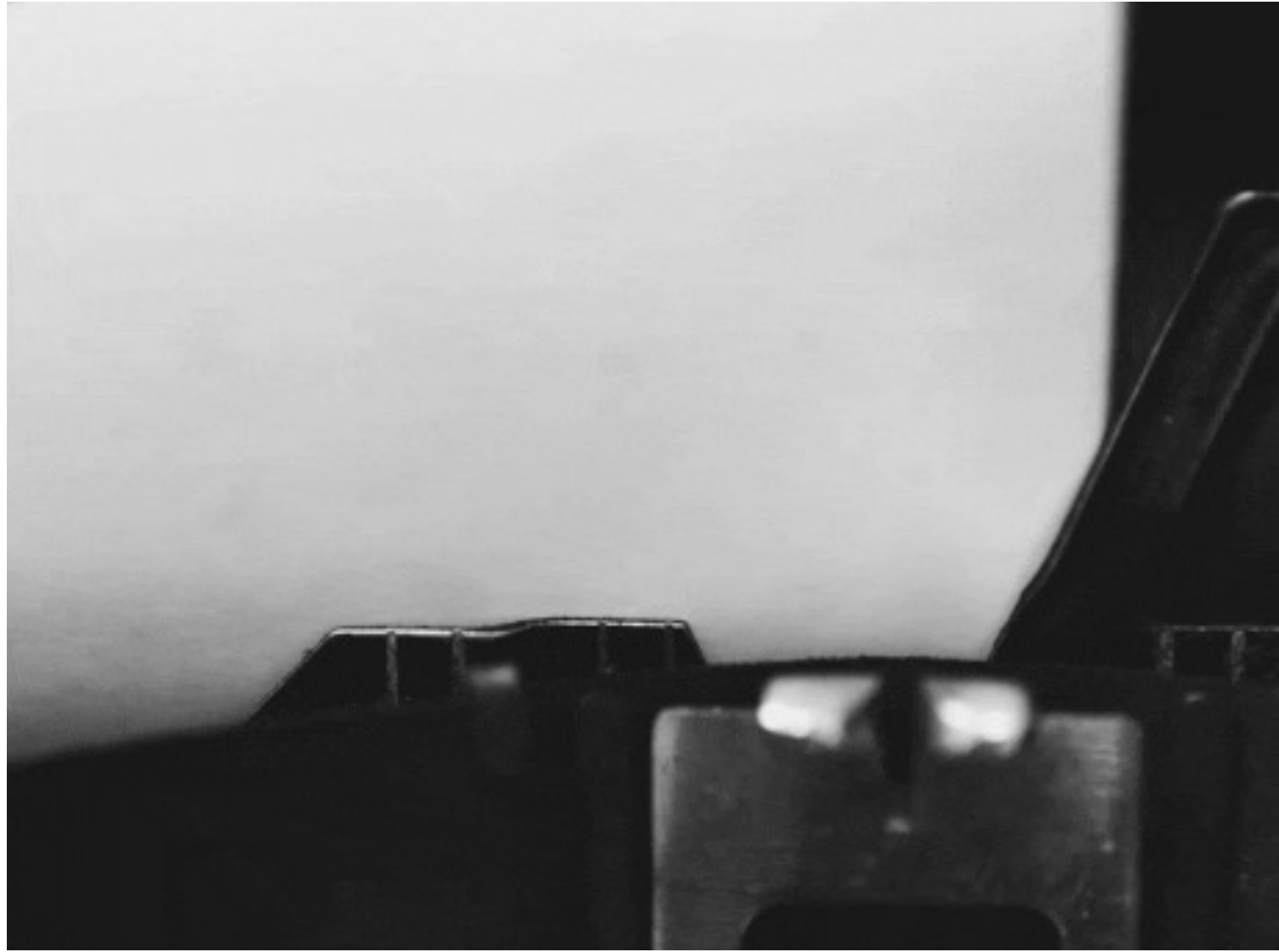
- Remember Mark Hawthorne, who wrote about the kid chasing a squirrel? Here's the end of his obituary after a set-up that he wrote about social critic Marya Mannes in 1966.

The young reporter ended his story with a quotation from Ms. Mannes that might have been his own epitaph: "Why do you need drugs to give you excitement and revelation, when the real world, if you really bothered to examine it, is so full of both?"

- David W. Dunlap, New York Times

“If you’re going to cede the power of the last word to someone else, you’d better be damn sure that person deserves it.”

- Jennifer Senior, The Atlantic





Questions?

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