

# The Lead Paragraph

The first paragraph of a news article is called the lead. The lead is usually less than 25 words, and gives an overview of the event or story. The lead will often explain WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, and WHY. The reason for this is that when many people read newspapers, they often only read the first few paragraphs of a story, so journalists try to present all the important information first.

- Who - who was involved?
- What - what happened?
- Where - where did it happen?
- Why - why did it happen?
- When - when did it happen?
- How - how did it happen?

## Six Rules for Writing a Straight News Lead

**Rule #1:** A news lead should be a single paragraph consisting of a single sentence, should contain **no more than 30 words**, and should summarize, at minimum, the most newsworthy “what,” “where” and “when” of the story.

- **Example: “Fire destroyed a house on Main Street early Monday morning.”**

The lead is a single-sentence paragraph. Note, please, that a lead should be written in ordinary English, not the clipped phrasing reserved for headlines.

The lead also summarizes the main “what” of the story, which is that fire destroyed a house. It provides the “where” of the story with the phrase “on Main Street.” Finally, the lead gives the “when” of the story with the phrase “early Monday morning.”

**Rule #2:** The lead's first verb should express the main "what" of the story and should be placed among the lead's first seven words.

- Example: "Fire destroyed a house on Main Street early Monday morning."

The verb "destroyed" expresses the main "what" of the story. "Destroyed" is the lead's second word — a position that puts "destroyed" well in front of "Street," the lead's seventh word. Again, notice that the word count includes even little words like "a" and "on."

There are no other verbs in front of "destroyed," so "destroyed" is the lead's first verb. Following this rule will force you to quickly tell readers what the story is about.

**Rule #3:** The lead's first verb — the same one that expresses the main "what" of the story — should be active voice, not passive voice. A verb is active voice if the verb's subject did, is doing, or will do something.

- **Example: "Fire destroyed a house on Main Street early Monday morning."**

"Destroyed" is the verb. "Fire" is the verb's subject. "Fire" did something. It destroyed. A verb is passive voice if the verb's subject had, is having, or will have something done to it. For example, if the lead were, "A house was destroyed by fire on Main Street early Monday morning," "was" would be the verb, "house" would be the verb's subject, and "house" would have had something done to it. The house "was destroyed" (by fire). If you read your lead and feel compelled to add something like the "by fire" phrase after the verb in order to express who or what did what the verb is describing, chances are you've written a passive-voice lead.

**Rule #4:** If there's a "who" involved in the story, the lead should give some indication of who the "who" is.

- **First example: "An elderly Murfreesboro man died Monday when an early morning fire raged through his Main Street home."**

The "who" is "an elderly Murfreesboro man." In this case, the "who" probably isn't someone whose name readers would recognize. As a result, the "who" angle of the lead focuses on what things about the "who" might make the "who" important to the reader.

In this case, it's the fact that the man was older and lived in Murfreesboro. The man's name will be revealed later in the story

- Second example: **“Murfreesboro Mayor Joe Smith died Monday when an early morning fire raged through his Main Street home.”**

Smith is the local mayor, and most readers probably will recognize his name.

As a result, the lead's "who" element gives his name. So, use the name of the "who" in the lead only when the name is likely to be recognized by a large percentage of your audience.

**Rule #5:** The lead should summarize the "why" and "how" of the story, but only if there's room.

- Example: **“An elderly Murfreesboro man died early Monday morning when fire sparked by faulty wiring raged through his Main Street home.”**

In this example, "... fire ... raged through his Main Street home ..." explains *why* the man died. Meanwhile, "... sparked by faulty wiring ..." explains *how* the blaze began.

**Rule #6:** If what's in the lead needs to be attributed, place the attribution at the end of the lead, never at the beginning of the lead.

- Example: **“Faulty wiring most likely sparked the blaze that claimed the life of an elderly Murfreesboro man last week, the city's arson investigator concluded Monday.”**

## References

Blake, K. (2018, February 3). *Six rules for writing a straight news lead*. KEN BLAKE, PH.D. <https://drkblake.com/six-rules-for-writing-a-straight-news-lead/#:~:text=of%20the%20lead.,Rule%20%231%3A%20A%20straight%20news%20lead%20should%20be%20a%20single,Main%20Street%20early%20Monday%20morning.>

