

Story Angles and Lead Paragraph Construction

This lesson was developed by Sue Laue, program manager, Columbia Links, Columbia College Chicago, and Billy Montgomery, journalism professor, Roosevelt University and Columbia College Chicago.

Journalism – English Language Arts

Overview & Purpose

Journalists are storytellers, and so bring their own unique perspective and creativity to each story. In addition, while the facts of a story may be objective, an individual who has lived the story may have a unique take on how those facts have affected his or her life, or others who may be impacted by the occurrence or set of facts.

In telling a story, a reporter must reflect that perspective, but also fashion it to engage the reader, using his or her own creative license to develop a story angle, while making sure the facts are clearly and accurately reported whether in a news or feature story. This lesson will help students discover their own unique way of telling a story while teaching them to convey the facts in an objective, accurate and truthful manner.

State Common Core Curriculum Standards

www.isbe.net or www.corestandards.org

This lesson applies the State Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Social and Emotional Learning, Grades 9-12. Teachers are aligning their teaching and curriculum with these new federal and state learning performance standards to produce a common achievement outcome for all students. *Scroll down to bottom of lesson plan for individual standards and their relevance to this lesson.*

Materials/Sources for Teaching the Lesson

Song: “Brenda’s Got A Baby,” by the late Tupac Shakur.

Writing a Strong Lead Paragraph, Purdue University: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/735/05/> (visit OWL website or scroll down to end of lesson for material).

Learning Links for the Classroom

In this section of the lesson plan are classroom teaching options, discussion and question/answer prompts and journaling and writing assignments for assessment and evaluation of student learning and knowledge.

Definition of Story Angle

Story angle is the unique perspective that a writer or reporter has in telling a story and how he or she fashions the story to engage the reader. A good correlation to demonstrate how to pull abstract concepts into a story that is compelling can be drawn from the music world.

Definition of A Lead Paragraph

A lead paragraph is a short summary of the facts of a story, answering the questions, Who, What, When, Where, Why and How? The lead paragraph must be concise, brief and engage the reader, using a unique story angle and creative voice. Subsequent paragraphs in a story elaborate on the lead paragraph and relate more and Why and How elements of the story.

Teach 1

Music Review

To illustrate how music tells a story, have students go on-line and find the song, “*Brenda’s Got A Baby*,” by the late Tupac Shakur. The song is based on a true story about the murder of a 12-year-old prostitute and how she endured in a daunting environment prior to her untimely death. In addition, pass out the lyrics (to obtain visit any music lyrics website).

Activity

Let the entire song play through once. Then, play the song again, and ask the students to look for story elements they would use to report what happened to Brenda, keeping in mind that the most important facts can constitute the lead. After the song ends, ask the students to list the story elements on the board and then tell the story from it. It is always amazing to see the number of different approaches students take in telling the story, and it serves as a good way to show how to approach a story from different angles.

Teach 2

Lead Paragraph Construction

Review and print Purdue University’s Owl resource page on-line (link above) for writing a lead paragraph. Pass out the material to students and have them read the definition of a lead paragraph, tips to constructing a lead, what to avoid and summary lead paragraphs.

Discussion

From Purdue University material:

Q – What are the key components of a lead?

A – Who, what, when, where, why and how.

Q – In the music story above, of these elements, what should come first in a lead?

A – The fact that someone was killed, so who, what, when come first; and then any circumstances surrounding the murder. Answering the how question may be somewhat possible in the first story, depending on the investigation, but the why may come in later stories.

Q – What should a reporter/writer avoid in writing a lead paragraph?

A – Being indirect, and give an example; and being too formulaic, stifling creativity.

Assessments

Writing 1

Write a lead paragraph based on the facts in the “*Brenda’s Got A Baby*” song. Ask students to volunteer to read their paragraph and tell which of the five W’s and How that they emphasized first and why. What would they include in a second paragraph?

Writing 2

Provide students with the following facts, and ask them to write a lead paragraph, using their creativity to develop a story angle. Ask for volunteers to read lead paragraphs and note how each is unique in regard to story angle, tone or word usage.

Who: State legislators

What: Proposal to increase age for driver’s license from 16 to 18 in IL

When: Voting in five days

Where: Springfield General Assembly

Why: Pro - Teens more responsible at age 18, fewer accidents, keep teens focused on high school studies to raise lagging academic achievement

Con – No data proving 16-year-olds are worse drivers than 18-year-olds, inconvenience to parents as teens help with errands and driving to events.

Writing 3

Provide students with the following facts, and ask them to write a lead paragraph, using their creativity to develop a story angle. Ask for volunteers to read lead paragraphs and note how each is unique in regard to story angle, tone or word usage.

Who: Daughter of Chicago Mayor John Sullivan, Clarise Sullivan (fictitious names), age 16

What: Robbed of \$50 and physically knocked down or assaulted

When: Saturday, June 23, around 9 p.m.

Where: On the L, Red Line while coming home early from a Cubs game, near the Addison stop

Why: More robberies in Chicago and on trains possibly due to recession and lack of jobs for people, later evening travel, isolated areas.

How: Safety tips from police, ie., stay in groups, don't carry large sums of money, use a backpack carried in front or hidden fanny pack.

State Common Core Standards

www.isbe.net or www.corestandards.org

Links Lesson Plan 3, News Literacy: Story Angles & Lead Paragraph Construction

This lesson applies and reinforces the following selected Common Core Curriculum Standards for English Language Arts and Social and Emotional Learning, Grades 9-12. Teachers are aligning their teaching and curriculum with these new federal and state performance standards to produce a common achievement outcome for all students. To find other common core standards that may apply to this lesson, visit www.isbe.net or www.corestandards.org.

Grades 9-10

English Language Arts

Reading for Informational Text

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
2. Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
3. Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections drawn between them.
7. Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.
8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

Writing – Text Types & Purpose

- 1.d. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.
1. e. Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-

generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
8. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

Social and Emotional Learning Standards Early High School

Goal 3: Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.

Standard A: Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.

3A.4a. Demonstrate personal responsibility in making ethical decisions.

3A.4b. Evaluate how social norms and expectations of authority influence personal decisions and actions.

Grades 11-12 English Language Arts

Reading for Informational Text

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.
3. Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
7. Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Writing – Text Types & Purpose

1.d. Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, to demonstrate understanding of the subject under investigation.
8. Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and over reliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

Social and Emotional Learning Standards Late High School

Goal 3: Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.

Standard A: Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.

3A.5a. Apply ethical reasoning to evaluate societal practices.

3A.5b. Examine how the norms of different societies and cultures influence their members' decisions and behaviors.

For additional Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons that relate to journalism, visit www.lionsquest.org. Lions Clubs International, Oak Brook, IL, has developed a set of lesson plans to teach social and emotional learning skills to teens, including listening, interviewing, questioning, communicating, researching, ethics and decision-making.

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Resource Material for Writing a Lead Paragraph

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Visit <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/735/05/>

How to Write a Lead

Summary: These resources provide an overview of journalistic writing with explanations of the most important and most often used elements of journalism and the Associated Press style. This resource, revised according to The Associated Press Stylebook 2011, offers examples for the general format of AP style. For more information, please consult The Associated Press Stylebook 2011, 46th edition.

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Introduction

The lead, or opening paragraph, is the most important part of a news story. With so many sources of information – newspapers, magazines, TV, radio and the Internet – audiences simply are not willing to read beyond the first paragraph (and even sentence) of a story unless it grabs their interest. A good lead does just that. It gives readers the most important information in a clear, concise and interesting manner. It also establishes the voice and direction of an article.

Tips for Writing a Lead

- 1. The Five W's and H:** Before writing a lead, decide which aspect of the story – who, what, when, where, why, how – is most important. You should emphasize those aspects in your lead. Wait to explain less important aspects until the second or third sentence.
- 2. Conflict:** Good stories have conflict. So do many good leads.
- 3. Specificity:** Though you are essentially summarizing information in most leads, try to be specific as possible. If your lead is too broad, it won't be informative or interesting.
- 4. Brevity:** Readers want to know why the story matters to them and they won't wait long for the answer. Leads are often one sentence, sometimes two. Generally, they are 25 to 30 words and should rarely be more than 40. This is somewhat arbitrary, but it's important – especially for young journalists – to learn how to deliver information concisely. See the OWL's page on [concise writing](#) for specific tips. The [Paramedic Method](#) is also good for writing concisely.

1.Active sentences: Strong verbs will make your lead lively and interesting. Passive constructions, on the other hand, can sound dull and leave out important information, such as the person or thing that caused the action. Incomplete reporting is often a source of [passive leads](#).

2.Audience and context: Take into account what your reader already knows. Remember that in today's media culture, most readers become aware of breaking news as it happens. If you're writing for a print publication the next day, your lead should do more than merely regurgitate yesterday's news.

3.Honesty: A lead is an implicit promise to your readers. You must be able to deliver what you promise in your lead.

What to Avoid

Flowery language: Many beginning writers make the mistake of overusing adverbs and adjectives in their leads. Concentrate instead on using strong verbs and nouns.

Unnecessary words or phrases: Watch out for unintentional redundancy. For example, 2 p.m.

Wednesday afternoon, or very unique. You can't afford to waste space in a news story, especially in the lead. Avoid clutter and cut right to the heart of the story.

Formulaic leads: Because a lot of news writing is done on deadline, the temptation to write tired leads is strong. Resist it. Readers want information, but they also want to be entertained. Your lead must sound genuine, not merely mechanical.

It: Most editors frown on leads that begin with the word it because it is not precise and disorients the reader.

Types of Leads

Summary Lead: This is perhaps the most traditional lead in news writing. It is often used for breaking news. A story about a city council vote might use this "just the facts" approach. Straight news leads tend to provide answers to the most important three or four of the Five W's and H. Historically this type of lead has been used to convey who, what, when and where. But in today's fast-paced media atmosphere, a straightforward recitation of who, what, when and where can sound stale by the time a newspaper hits the stands. Some newspapers are adjusting to this reality by posting breaking news online as it happens and filling the print edition with more evaluative and analytical stories focused on why and how. Leads should reflect this.

Anecdotal Lead: Sometimes, beginning a story with a quick anecdote can draw in readers. The anecdote must be interesting and must closely illustrate the article's broader point. If you use this approach, specificity and concrete detail are essential and the broader significance of the anecdote should be explained within the first few sentences following the lead.

Other types of Leads: A large number of other approaches exist, and writers should not feel boxed in by formulas. That said, beginning writers can abuse certain kinds of leads. These include leads that begin with a question or direct quotation and those that make a direct appeal using the word you. While such leads might be appropriate in some circumstances, use them sparsely and cautiously.

Examples

Summary Lead

County administrator faces ouster

By Tony Cook for The Cincinnati Post, Jan. 14, 2005

Two Hamilton County Commissioners plan to force the county's top administrator out of office today.

Commentary: This lead addresses the traditional who, what and when. If this information had been reported on TV or radio the day before, this lead might not be a good one for the print edition of the newspaper; however, if the reporter had an exclusive or posted this information online as soon as it

became available, then this lead would make sense. Note that it is brief (15 words) and uses an active sentence construction.

Summary Lead

Lobbyists flout disclosure rules in talks with commissioners

By Tony Cook and Michael Mishak for the Las Vegas Sun, July 13, 2008

On more than 170 occasions this year, lobbyists failed to file disclosure forms when they visited Clark County commissioners, leaving the public in the dark about what issues they were pushing and on whose behalf.

Commentary: This lead is more representative of the less timely, more analytical approach that some newspapers are taking in their print editions. It covers who, what and when, but also why it matters to readers. Again, it uses active verbs, it is specific (170 occasions) and it is brief (35 words).

Anecdotal Lead

Tri-Staters tell stories of the devastating tsunami

By Tony Cook for The Cincinnati Post, Jan. 8, 2005

From Dan Ralescu's sun-warmed beach chair in Thailand, the Indian Ocean began to look, oddly, not so much like waves but bread dough.

Commentary: This article is a local angle on the devastating tsunami that struck Southeast Asia in 2005. As a result of the massive death toll and worldwide impact, most readers would have been inundated with basic information about the tsunami. Given that context, this lead uses an unexpected image to capture the reader's attention and prepare them for a new take on the tsunami. Again, it is brief (23 words).

Question Lead

Same lobbyist for courts, shorter term, more money

By Tony Cook for the Las Vegas Sun, June 29, 2008

What's increasing faster than the price of gasoline? Apparently, the cost of court lobbyists. District and Justice Court Judges want to hire lobbyist Rick Loop for \$150,000 to represent the court system in Carson City through the 2009 legislative session. During the past session, Loop's price tag was \$80,000.

Commentary: Question leads can be useful in grabbing attention, but they are rarely as effective as other types of leads in terms of clearly and concisely providing the main point of a story. In this case, the second paragraph must carry a lot of the weight that would normally be handled in the lead.