




Starting & writing a story

Ledes, nut grafs, & so on

Steve Stewart, April 2011



The lede (lead)

- First few paragraphs of the story.
- The first paragraph should generally be short.
- The lede may extend into another paragraph or two.



4 things a lede must do

- Suck 'em in.
- Give 'em a clue.
- Start strong
- Don't waste words.




Suck 'em in

- Many things compete for readers' attention, especially when they're reading websites.
- If you don't grab them within seconds, they'll move on.
- Your lede should make the rest of the story impossible to resist.




Give 'em a clue

- Your lede should at least hint at what the point of the story is.
- It needn't try to make the whole point — if you follow it with a strong nut graf.
- Not giving a hint wastes the reader's time, angers him and invites him to go elsewhere.




Start strong

- The very first words of the lede should be interesting, eye-catching, effective.
- Don't waste that prime position with a boring word or words, such as a day of the week.




Don't waste words

- Try to keep your lede at no more than 25 words.
- Say a lot with the words you use.
 - Choose them carefully.
 - Save extraneous details for later.
 - Don't feel as if you need to cover all five W's, the H and the S in the first paragraph.




Your lede should be

- Specific
- Interesting
- Something your readers didn't already know
- Based on the facts you acquired while researching the story




Which comes first?

- Story idea
- Research
 - Details
 - Quotations
- Writing



Every story should have a main point

- Tailor it to the audience.
- Make the point absolutely clear to the audience.
- Build the story around that point.
- Don't wander around.
- Cut ruthlessly.




Before you start writing, know ...

- Who your audience is
- What point you want to make

Where do you make the point?


- In the lede, or ...
- In the nut graf.

The lede and nut graf may be one and the same
— or maybe not.




Nut graf (graph, or paragraph)

- Gives the story's theme.
- Summarizes the key facts.
- The lede and nut graf could be one and the same.
- Nut graf usually should appear no later than the fourth paragraph.



Example of lede & nut graf combined:

Sen. Joe Biden will make his first appearance before the Democratic National Convention as his party's vice presidential nominee Wednesday night, but the real drama of the evening may come from former President Bill Clinton and what he says about Sen. Barack Obama. —cnn.com




Example of a “soft” lede ...

GREENWICH, England (AP) — Emily Deschanel and David Boreanaz are stuck in a Mini Cooper, just steps from where East meets West.

The little red car has just been in an “accident” and is facing oncoming traffic near the Greenwich Royal Observatory, the location on the bank of the Thames River from where all time zones are measured.


—The Associated Press



... followed by a nut graf

The stars of “Bones” have come to England to film the premiere episode of the Fox drama’s fourth season, and they’ve brought all their characters’ emotional baggage with them.

—The Associated Press



After the lede and nut graf ...

- Tell the story in clear, simple language.
- Use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Quote somebody within the first four paragraphs.
- Alternate paraphrases and direct quotations.
- Give details.
- Tell readers things they didn’t already know.



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