

Notes on Ledes (a.k.a. Leads)

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History

The “lede” is one of the most important parts of a news story or feature article. The word is pronounced “leed” as in “I was in the lead at the end of the race.” In recent years, lead in this sense has begun to replace lede in articles and listings that refer to introductory paragraphs and sentences.

But many journalists and editors, especially those who worked for newspapers that were typeset by hand or linotype machine (basically all newspapers until the 1970’s and 1980’s), still prefer lede. Back then, people confused lead as in “leed” with the typesetting metal lead (pronounced “led”). In the past year, Copyblogger.com has added a blog called “Lede,” which covers copywriting and online marketing.



To avoid problems when editing or proofreading text for printing -- which often required instructions about adding the lines of the metal lead between sentences and paragraphs -- journalists opted for “lede” as the preferred spelling for the introductory portion of a news story.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, “lede” is an “Obsolete spelling of lead, revived in modern journalism to distinguish the word from lead, *strip of metal separating lines of type.*” MW says the first known use of “lede” was in 1976. The printed 2011 AP Stylebook doesn’t mention lede or lead, but in its online guide it uses lead as in “leed” in several entries. Before the invention of the linotype in 1884, no newspaper in the world had more than eight pages.

Types of Ledes

There are many ledes but Dave Cohn (<http://youngwriter.typepad.com>) categorizes them usefully as hard and soft.

- The hard lead should be quick and to the point and give the reader the basic information in the story.
- Here is Dave’s lead for Little Red Ridding (intentional spelling) Hood: “A 10-year-old girl and her bed-ridden grandmother escaped death yesterday after a woodsman hacked open a cross-dressing wolf that swallowed them whole.”
- Provides the essential facts, a “snapshot” if you will from which you can elaborate.
- Makes a statement, summarizes.
- Engages, provokes, asserts.
- Minimizes qualifiers, uses active voice. Is inviting, informative, to the point, no backing in.
- Uses all the right adjectives, not just any adjectives.
- One sentence, not several.
- One idea, one angle. Plays to target audience’s interests – E.g., prurience (what happened?), fear (O my goodness), Directed to target media interests. **Three Lede Examples**

- **Factual** (5 W's only, to the point).
At the annual meeting of XYZ company today, John Doe, president and CEO, reported that the company's sales of sugar were up by X millions of pounds over last year because of a 10% surge in consumer demand in China and India. Doe said he expects sales to increase again next year as the populations of both countries grow.
- **Descriptive** (5 W's, longer, feature oriented).
When John Doe was 20 he ran a candy store in the Bronx but as hard as he tried he could barely make ends meet. Fast forward 30 years and there's John worth tens of millions and head of XYZ, the world's largest sugar conglomerate. On Friday, at XYZ's annual meeting, John announced that sales were up by XX million pounds over the year before because of a 10% surge in consumer demand in China and India, with more demand to come. Since ????, XYZ has grown into one of the most profitable companies on earth, selling billions of pounds of sugar to mankind.
- **Feature** (5 W's, lengthy, "colorful" with enticing or provocative angle).
Sugar strengthens brains. Sugar heals wounds. Sugar prevents mold. In fact, sugar is one of the world's healthiest foods. That's what John Doe believes and he, if anyone, should know. He's president and CEO of XYZ company. Last year, he got a \$10-million pay increase because he sells so much of the stuff. Is he right? His investors certainly think so. They voted him the raise. But a growing chorus of critics, chief among them doctors and nutritionists, say he's not only wrong but dangerous to our health.

Lede Ideas and Angles

Should be:

- Newsworthy
- Timely
- Topical
- Trendy

- Longevity
- Environment
- Sex
- Child care
- Personal development

Should have:

- Drama
- Controversy
- Conflict
- Human interest
- Local interest

Good sources:

- Surveys (consumers, voters, employees)
- Statistics (e.g, Top 10 List)

Good angles:

- Health
- Money