

Imagine

you are writing a story, and you have all this cool information, but you can't figure out how to get started. Well...

By Bobby Hawthorne
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What Makes a Good Lead?

- A startling statement
- An odd twist
- An interesting detail
- An anecdote
- A great quote
- Description of a person, place or moment

A few rules...

- Get to the point
- Be specific and as brief as possible.
- No unnecessary, dead words.
- As a general rule, keep it third person.
- Don't begin with date or school's name.

Open with a Bang!

She never knew she had it.

Minutes before the meeting began, Bill Farney got the bad news.

An odd twist.

Some preschool teachers would do anything to keep their students quiet. Phyllis Wilson's classroom is designed to get kids talking.

Ms. Wilson's seven preschoolers have a variety of disabilities that leave them with low verbal skills. So she's worked with Houston school district speech-language pathologist Johanna Olson to create an environment that teaches out their voices.

A startling statement!

America's 77 million boomers are in for a rude awakening.

A startling statement!

The generation that thought it would stay young forever will begin turning 65 in five years and is discovering there aren't enough physicians trained to take care of the frailties of old age.

“It's scary. We're about to have a major medical crisis that will overburden millions of families,” said Dr. Harrison Bloom of the International Longevity Center in New York.

Get to the heart of the matter

The voice inside senior Jason Fleming's head won't go away.

It talks to him, tells him not to panic, to keep playing. “You’re just one hot hand away from the big pay-off.”

And that’s how, as a 17-year-old, he rolled up more than \$12,000 in debt, gambling on the Internet.

“I bet on sports events, played poker online, you name it,” Fleming said. “Once I got in over my head, I needed a big win in order to get even. And I never got it.”

Look for interesting details

Denise Augustus begins each day at 4 a.m. with a glass of water and a prayer.

After gulping down the water, she kneels, stands or lies on her back as she performs her daily devotions. At 5, she wakes her son, Sherwin, 17, for school. After the two eat breakfast together, Ms. Augustus lifts weights. The exercise is as necessary as brushing her teeth because it makes her slender arms strong enough to carry Sherwin, who has muscular dystrophy, from his bed to the bathroom to his wheelchair.

Grab the reader

If these walls could talk, they would never shut up.

In a city where graffiti was once punishable by death, there's barely a surface today that doesn't shout a political position, from the sacred "We shall return with the army of Muhammad" — to the profane.

The Arabic script that crisscrosses almost every wall in Baghdad is like American talk radio — obscene, inaccurate and often hilarious political abuse.

Get to it

Lee Bond's summer didn't work out at all as he planned.

The 16-year-old junior had lined up a job and planned to spend a lot of this free time on the couch or in the pool. Then the phone rang.

On the other end of the line was a representative of the Glassmen, a 128-member drum-and-bugle corps — and one of the world's elite. A tuba player in the high school band, Lee had inquired a few weeks earlier about a tryout with the corps but says he never expected anything to come of it.

Well, he never got his tryout. What he got was an urgent request to join the corps at its home base in Toledo, Ohio, to fill a last-minute opening.

Cool lead

Practical arts teacher Cindi Herman and Matt Dieckhaus share an office space, a passion for teaching and countless jokes. Before long, they'll share kidneys.

Then and now

Charles and Laura LaPage spent more than 50 years perfecting their Lower Ninth Ward home, buying carpets and silk draperies to accent their marble-top furniture and hardwood floors, crystal chandeliers and porcelain lamps. Their garden was awash in colorful bushes and flowers.

Now, black mold creeps up their walls, the collectibles are shattered, and mildewed furniture lies in a heap on the curb. Despite the near-total devastation, the LaPages want to rebuild and start over. But they are finding that the second wave of Hurricane Katrina's wrath is dealing with the insurance company.

“Nobody has gotten anything,” Mr. LaPage said as he watched workers carry out once-beloved items from his home. “We’re totally dissatisfied with the progress on the insurance. Anything to keep from paying.”

Nearly three months after Katrina, frustrations are mounting for residents whose homes and possessions were laid waste by the storm.

Surprise me!

After tension-filled hours of last-minute primping, the time had come for the contestants to walk into the arena and strut their stuff in front of the three judges and an appreciative crowd.

Some walked briskly with an air of confidence. Others, distracted by the lights and cameras, shuffled along slowly. A few, overcome by the pressure, foamed at the mouth and moaned.

Even though Saturday's market steer competition at the Austin-Travis County Livestock Show and Rodeo was like many other beauty pageants, there were some obvious differences.

The contestants — steers weighing more than half a ton — were being judged on the type of T-bones and rump roasts they would turn into instead of their appearance in an evening gown or bathing suit.

**Open with the specific,
then go to the general.**

Rather than...

In cities and suburbs around the country, schools are increasingly sending students into the juvenile justice system for the sort of adolescent misbehavior that used to be handled by school administrators.

Use a specific example

The 14-year-old girl arrived at school here on Oct. 17 wearing a low-cut midriff top under an unbuttoned sweater. It was a clear violation of the dress code, and school officials gave her a bowling shirt to put on. She refused. Her mother came to the school with an oversize T-shirt. She refused to wear that too.

“It was real ugly,” huffed the girl, whose mother did not want to be identified.

It was standoff. So the city police officer assigned to the school handcuffed the girl, put her in a police car and took her to the detention center at the Lucas County juvenile courthouse. She was booked on a misdemeanor charge and placed in a holding cell for several hours, until her mother, a 34-year-old vending machine technician, got off work and picked her up.

She was one of more than two dozen students in Toledo who were arrested in school in October for offenses like being loud and disruptive, cursing at school officials, shouting at classmates and violating the dress code. They had all violated the city's safe school ordinance.

In cities and suburbs around the country, schools are increasingly sending students into the juvenile justice system for the sort of adolescent misbehavior that used to be handled by school administrators. In Toledo and many other places, the juvenile detention center has become an extension of the principal's office.

How to make NCLB boring...

In 2002, Congress passed the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" Act, which mandates that schools bring all groups of students up to grade level on standardized reading and math tests, including special education students. Consequently, across the nation, thousands of schools were deemed "failing" because of the test performance of special ed students.

This certainly is the case here . . .

How to make NCLB interesting

The kids in Michelle Harper's special education class have their own small victories each day — a temper tantrum stifled, two words rhymed.

When it comes to time to take the standardized tests that federal government uses to measure public schools, Ms. Harper's students at White Mountain Middle School merely pick answers at random, not realizing the potentially severe consequences for their school.

Across the country this year, thousands of schools were deemed “failing” because of the test performance of special ed students.

The results have provoked feelings of fury, helplessness and amusement in teachers like Ms. Harper, who say that because of some of their students’ disabilities, there is no realistic way to ever meet the expectations of a new federal law that requires that 99 percent of all children be performing at or above grade level by 2014.

If schools fail to meet those targets, they risk being taken over by the state or private companies. Teachers could lose their jobs.

“These children are going to plateau at a certain level — that is, the nature of a disability,” said Ms. Harper, who teaches students with autism, learning disabilities, mental retardation, Tourette’s syndrome, vision and hearing deficiencies and brain injuries.

“These kids are not going to grow out of it, not going to grow up and be OK,” she said. “It’s sad, but that is the way it is.”

Don't open your story with a statement of the obvious.

Millions of teenagers have jobs. They work for many reasons: college, cars, just to have some spending money in their pocket.

Sleep is important. If a person doesn't get enough sleep, he or she can become irritable, depressed, even suicidal. Many teens don't get enough sleep.

Beating, stirring, baking, eating. Those are actions frequently seen throughout the nutrition and food science rooms daily.

The purpose of Student Council is to serve as a liaison between students and administrators.

Thanksgiving is a time to celebrate all the things we Americans have to be thankful for.

Christmas is just around the corner, and students are already getting into the holiday spirit.

No melodramatics...

Scrambling through the barren kitchen, the boy searched frantically for a trace of food only to find stale croutons and peanut butter.

When his mother walked away from her children to pursue a boyfriend to Arizona and closed the door on her family, a home became a forlorn house of misery and despair, occupied by this 8-year-old boy and his two sisters.

His parents? Gone. His security? Gone. His future? Gone.

Instead, try this...

When he was eight, Dwayne Chapa's mother abandoned him and two younger sisters to chase a truck driver to Arizona.

"We woke up one morning, expecting her to be there, and she wasn't," he said. "For eight days, my sisters and I had nothing to eat except croutons and Jiffy peanut butter."

The “NOT” lead

Biology teacher John Muñoz spent the week in court.

What did he do? Did he murder a student who failed to turn in an assignment?

Did he assault fellow teacher Bill Freeman, who broke one of Muñoz' favorite beakers?

Did he break into the office and change everyone's grades for fun?

No. Muñoz didn't spent the week in court as a defendant in a murder trial. Just the opposite. He was serving on jury duty.

“I tried to get out of it,” he said. “But I couldn't, so I served. It was a murder trial, so it was pretty interesting.”

Avoid question leads

What would it be like to go to school in a completely foreign country for a year?

Well, junior April Gottesman can tell you the answer. Last year, she was an exchange student in Norway and experienced a life that is very different from other SHS students.

“It’s cold there all the time,” April said. “I had to wear a lot of clothes.”

But then, now and then...

What color Popsicle melts fastest? When it comes to diapers, do you get what you pay for?

If you dropped household cleanser onto a radish seed, would you — at least, the seed — be better off with bleach or outdoor glass cleaner?

Bleach is OK, found third-grader Walker Priddy. Stay away from most others, the 9-year-old said. “Especially if it’s Windex.”

Walker and more than 400 of his classmates answered their most pressing questions with science projects this year.

No boring quote leads

“We hope to win the game because winning is good and losing is bad,” boys baseball coach Lenny Lingle said. “I know we’ll give 110 percent.”

Coming off a 7-1 win over Richmond Lee, the Lions will take on undefeated Mammoth High at 7 p.m. Friday for the regional championship.

“We haven’t whipped them in 10 years,” Lingle said. “But I think this just might be our year.”

But this quote lead works

“We haven’t whipped them in 10 years,” boys baseball coach Lenny Lingle said of Friday night’s opponent, Mammoth High. “But I think this just might be our year.”

The Lions will take on the undefeated Giants at 7 p.m. Friday for the regional championship.

No Cliches!

- On your mark. Get set. GO!!!

- Ready? Okay! Rah, rah, rah. Siss! Boom!
Bah!

- And the winner is . . .

- 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1. Blast Off!!!

- Lights. Camera. Action.

- Order in the Court.

- Band. Ten-HUT!

- The golf team will swing into action this weekend . . .

- The swim team will dive into action . . .

- The football team kicks off its season . . .

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- Most people think going to school on Saturday is terrible. But not Henry. He loves it!

No 'Imagine' leads

Imagine, you are in a spaceship that lands on Mars, and you meet a totally weird space alien, and this alien says to you, "Greetings, Earthman. Take me to your leader."

This hasn't happened to anyone. Yet! But maybe one day, it might.

Avoid first or second person

Trevor Rush is one cool dude. I had a chance to rap with him the other day, and he really laid some heavy thoughts on me. He's just about the smartest, sexiest, most attractive, neatest guy in our school. Any girl would absolutely melt if he talked to her.

Trevor is also a national champion gymnast with the bluest eyes you ever saw and a real bouncy personality — no pun intended.

Boom! Your lead bombed.

Buzz goes the saw as another board gets cut to meet the perfect measurement. CRASH! The left-over wood falls to the ground. SWOOOSH. The broom cleans up the sawdust.

These sounds are common in the woodworking class.

Don't overstate a situation

Tomorrow morning, you may be awakened by some rather loud sounds. Don't worry. The world's not coming to an end.

And it's not a terrorist attack.

It's just the band on its March-A-Thon.

No 'Webster defines' leads

Webster defines courage as “mental or moral strength to venture, persevere and withstand danger, fear or difficulty.”

Sophomore Amy Murray is the embodiment of courage. For the past year, she has been fighting a courageous battle against a rare blood disease.

Original approach that shows

Practically every chair in the waiting room of the hematology/oncology clinic at Children's Medical Center is filled with fidgety children or parents who are trying to soothe and distract them.

They may not know one another, but they share each other's pain, worry and fear. Most of the waiting children have serious blood disorders or cancer. Some are too young to understand what's happening. They only want to go home. Others are old enough to know. They just want to be healed.

In the hallway beside the waiting room, sophomore Amy Murray reclines on a maroon vinyl couch. A multicolored quilt covers her frail 92-pound body. A pink iPod is tucked under the yellow and blue pillow she brought from her home in Grand Prairie.

At her side is an intravenous pole where red blood cells slowly seep into her veins through a catheter that is permanently attached to her chest. This is Amy's lifeline, the only thing that keeps her alive.

Amy has a rare disease — aplastic anemia — that results from the failure of the bone marrow to produce blood cells. Because she has dangerously low levels of blood cells, she has to repeatedly fight infections and episodes of internal bleeding.

The devastating and often fatal disease has taken its toll on Amy. Her skin is sallow, her hair lifeless. Her smiles are weak and constrained.

“Sometimes, I feel like fighting,” she said.
“Sometimes, I just get by.”

Since Amy was diagnosed in June, she has received dozens of transfusions and antibiotics. They work but only temporarily. She always needs more.

“I wonder why it happened to me, what I did to deserve it,” she says, sitting in a treatment room while the blood drips into the catheter. “No one should go through this. I don’t wish it on anyone else, but I wish it wasn’t me.”

How to find your lead

- Report first.
- What is the story about?
- What's the emotional/visual center of the story?
- Are sensory details important?
- How can you illustrate this?
- What is the tone of the story?
- What's your zinger quote?
- Write first draft.
- Now, reduce it by at least 25 percent.

For more great examples of leads...

THE *Radical Write*

By BOBBY HAWTHORNE

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