



Eliminating Sophomoric Sports Leads

By [Kenn Finkel](#)

Why write leads, anyway?

The lead to a story has one purpose, to get the reader to go further. Anything that causes the reader to blink, to re-read, to digest, to ponder the meaning or significance of your words, defeats the whole idea of the lead.

That being the case, let's look at some things that are not the purpose of the lead.

- To prove to your supervisor that you were there.
- To one-up the reporters at the competing newspapers.
- To impress editors on the sports copy desk.
- To make something simple into something complicated.
- To see how many facts or numbers you can cram into one sentence.
- To show how often you go to the movies.
- To demonstrate your knowledge of pop culture.
- To imitate people who read from a prompter on a television show.

Keep it simple.

There are few hard and fast rules for writing leads, but there are guidelines. As the whole idea is to get the reader to go further, you should examine any lead that tends to get complex. Declarative sentences that go easy on the numbers are a good start.

Every sentence shouldn't follow the same format, of course, but most leads do better when they follow the subject-verb-object style. And there's no rule that says the entire lead has to be one sentence.

Instead of:

With a lot of help from a defense that just wouldn't quit, an inspired Valley West team found itself staring at a season-destroying loss before rallying to beat Bradford, 17-16, at Parkland Stadium last night on a Frank Foster

25-yard field goal with three seconds left in the game that followed a critical Ed Parker interception of a Steve Willingham pass.

Try this:

Valley West defeated Bradford, 17-16, last night, relying on its defense to avoid what would have been a season-destroying loss. A late rally led to a 25-yard Frank Foster field goal with three seconds left, but Ed Parker's interception of a Steve Willingham pass had made that possible.

The second example gets in the same facts as the first, and the facts are mostly in the same order. The differences are the simplicity of the subject-verb-object format and the fact that the lead is two sentences instead of one.

Few readers would work their way through the first example. Leads like that one might satisfy a reporter attempting to get as many ideas as possible into the first sentence, but for what purpose? Who gains from that? The whole idea is to entice the reader to go further, not to absorb as much as possible before pausing at a period. The second example gets in the facts with a less-breathless style, at least making it easier on the reader.

It's the duty of the copy editor — to the reader as well as to the reporter — to fix the first example so that it resembles the second.

Some bad lead techniques.

These are among the kinds of leads that editors should attempt to eliminate from our sports sections:

- They are inundated with numbers.
- They attempt to cram too many unrelated facts into a sentence.
- They drop extraneous facts between commas, instead of into later paragraphs.
- They leave you breathless with hyperbole.
- They make preposterous presumptions, assuming that you'll know they're a joke.
- They set records with their sheer numbers of clichés.
- They cloak athletes in super-human clothing.
- They liken athletes to mythical animals.

- They load up on cute nicknames that bore the readers.
- They use buzzwords (nicknames that modify names instead of replacing them).
- They can't decide which angle is better — so they use both.
- They play the games — not on paper, but on a field or a court or ice or in a pool.
- They follow a quotation with a sentence that says the same thing.
- They are loaded with jargon — such as T*A*N synonymymania.
- They tell you that something is no exception to something that you already know.
- They tell you that someone is not your typical something.
- They tell you what happened on a certain date years ago, when it's not relevant.
- They toss in opinion loosely disguised as news reporting.
- They back into facts by saying that something was supposed to happen — and did.
- They ask general questions instead of telling you the answers.
- They ask you what several dissimilar people have in common.
- They begin with a pronoun, asking you to guess which noun it replaces.
- They set the scene by having someone lean back in a chair before talking.
- They set the scene with some ridiculous parallel that isn't connected to the story.
- They set the scene stating an error as fact.
- They make cliché David Letterman lists (number 10 through number 1).
- They liken individuals to Rodney Dangerfield (. . . get no respect).
- They make obscure references to film titles or lines.
- They superfluously remind us what day it is (Valentine's Day, July 4, Thanksgiving).
- They rely on odious comparisons for shock value (death, destruction, illness, injury).
- They trivialize war (bombs, infantry, artillery, battlefields, minefields, casualties).

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