BASIC MEDIA WRITING
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- List the “killer be’s” of writing and apply them to your own work as a media writer.
- Explain the inverted pyramid as a writing format and compare it with the chronological approach.
- Evaluate information in terms of value and order facts in descending order of importance.
- Construct a lead sentence on a given topic, using the 5W’s and 1H as guiding principles.

You have spent the majority of your life writing in some format or another. You have written term papers, texted friends, scribbled lecture notes and perhaps even scrawled some graffiti. In each case, you attempted to clearly communicate your thoughts on a valuable topic to a specific audience. Writing in these formats has become second nature because you have a clear understanding as to the rules governing your approach to writing. You know that a tweet needs to be 280 characters or fewer and that your term paper needs to be 10 pages. You know each writing approach has its own style, and each has a specific purpose. In addition, you can easily conceptualize your target audience. You write your term papers for your professor, send texts to communicate with your friends and write class notes for yourself. In each instance, you have a direct connection with the person on the other end of your work.

Media writing can seem more difficult than some of these other forms of writing because it often lacks those parameters. Some pieces are several pages long while others are only a few sentences. In addition, you have to retrain your brain to think about what various audience members need and then meet those needs. It’s more about what they want to know and less about what you want to say. Media writing also requires you to focus less on your opinions and more on the facts and opinions you get from sources.

In this chapter, we will look at some of the important elements of good writing that will help you communicate effectively with your readers, regardless of your discipline or your platform. The basic approach to writing discussed here will work just as easily online as it will on paper. The chapter will also explain how to pack a lot of important information into the top of your work so you can draw readers and engage them immediately. Finally, the chapter will explain how to write in a standard media format known as the inverted pyramid and show you why this format has value.

THE “KILLER BE’S” OF GOOD WRITING

Good writing is not an accident or a birthright. Don’t believe people who tell you they were “born writers,” as if only a select few were granted this gift. Instead, realize that writing is a skill anyone can grow, develop and shape. You can become an incredible writer if you work hard enough at it. These “killer” writing skills are not beyond your grasp.
If you want to be a “killer” writer, you have to “be” a number of other things as well. The list of things below is not exhaustive, but it focuses on things that you can practice until they become part of who you are as a writer.

**Be Right**

As we saw in Chapter 2, one of the primary things media writing demands of you is **accuracy**. Perfection is unattainable, and yet that is what is expected of you in this field. Obviously, you won’t be perfect, but you need to hold yourself to a standard as close to perfection as possible, because accuracy is the essential virtue of media writing.

If you find yourself writing in a news field and you inaccurately report information, your **credibility** will suffer because people will not be able to trust you. In many cases, your readers will attribute this to your being dumb or lazy. Although both of these things are bad, they pale in comparison to what readers will think of you if you work in public relations or advertising and you present inaccurate information. In those cases, the public tends to view you as being purposefully misleading in hopes of profiting from your lies. The idea that you made an honest mistake is unlikely to find accepting ears. This is especially true in an online environment, where people have been burned too often by “fake news” or propaganda-based websites.

Your readers will trust you after you give them a good reason to trust you. After that, trust remains a fragile item, and every time you write, you run the risk of shattering it. Trust is not a boomerang. If you throw it away, it doesn’t come back. One of the best ways to retain trust is to be accurate above all else.

**Be Tight**

Much of the writing students do in school is measured in terms of length, with page counts serving as the demarcation between acceptable and unacceptable submissions. Students have learned a number of tricks to make things longer, including adding adjectives before every noun, increasing the size of the font or even making the periods bigger. (For those of you who are unfamiliar with the “period trick,” here it is: http://youtu.be/tt3ac0inzBM.)

In a media setting, you want your writing to be short. Your readers don’t want to deal with ever-expanding sentences that ramble on. They also don’t have the time to hunt for key information amid paragraph after paragraph of things that don’t matter to them. You want to get to the point as quickly as possible and give your readers everything they need to know right away. Twists and turns are for mystery writers, and nine-page descriptions that set the scene are for novelists. If you want to grab a reader on a computer monitor with multiple other distractions available or on a mobile phone screen with limited space, you must tighten your copy until you wring out every unnecessary word.

You can do this during your first draft, although it’s usually easier to get the information out of your head and onto your screen without stopping. A good time to start tightening is after you write the whole piece. This allows you to take a good overview of everything you wrote before you start editing.

**Be Clear**

New writers are afraid of making mistakes, and thus they rely on $5 words and complex **jargon** to hide their insecurities. In most cases, this approach doesn’t help their writing, and it tends to confuse their readers. Your job in this field is to say what you mean as simply and clearly as possible.

You need to find the right word to make your point and use it in a straightforward manner. You need to look up concepts that confuse you and describe them in a way that anyone can
easily understand. You need to provide your readers with crucial information in a way that they can make sense of it.

Grammar guru Don Ranly lists **clarity** among his seven key “C’s” to credibility and for good reason. If people don’t understand you, they won’t trust you. Make your writing as clear as possible and you will give your readers a good reason to believe what you tell them.

**Be Active**

In Chapter 3, you got a giant grammar lesson, and here’s where it really starts to come into play. Active voice requires you to write in the noun-verb-object format described earlier, but this approach does more than appease the grammar geeks.

Active sentences are tighter sentences. The sentences “Bob hit the ball” and “The ball was hit by Bob” give your reader the same basic information. However, the second sentence contains 50 percent more words than the first one. Sure, it’s only two words, but if you convert the sentence to active voice and save those two words, you could use them later when you really need them.

When you write in this format, you want to pick vigorous verbs that are spot on in their descriptions of what is happening. This gives your readers the best chance of easily understanding each sentence. The sentence “Bill hit Bob” lacks the descriptive power of one that states “Bill slapped Bob.” Both are active, but the second one improves your clarity as well.

**Be Smooth**

The pace and flow of a piece will determine how well it reads. Short sentences disrupt the pace, while longer sentences can make you feel as if the piece is rambling. You want to use medium-paced sentences, which are discussed at length in Chapter 3, of 20 words or so with one or two simple ideas in each one.

Flow is something that comes from putting the sentences together in an order that makes sense. You can think of a good piece like you think of a tree: Each branch smoothly grows from the larger one before it, and it is often difficult to see exactly where one starts and the other stops. When you consider all the branches together, all you see is a complete tree. A bad piece of writing is like a bundle of sticks: Each stick comes from a tree, but the bundle lacks cohesion and organization.

To make your pieces flow better, you want to have a natural order to your writing. Think about how Sentence A can lead into Sentence B in a clear and simple way. Look for things that make the sentences similar, such as talking about the same idea or coming from the same source. Also, look for things that make the sentences different, such as opposing viewpoints on a common topic. Then, use those similarities and differences to connect your sentences as you move through a piece.

**Be Quick**

Whether your piece is four sentences or 40 sentences, you want to get to the point. Get the most important information to your readers as quickly as possible, and use quickness to keep them interested and engaged. Use tight, medium-paced sentences that help them see what you are saying and why it matters to them. This will keep your readers from becoming bored and will make sure they see the most valuable information in your piece right away.

With all of these things you have to be, it can be daunting to consider writing for the media. However, journalists have developed writing styles to help you meet the needs of your readers. The most tried and true of these formats is the inverted pyramid.
Although he has spent his entire professional career at one publication, Adam Silverman has seen a lot of change during his time at the Burlington [Vermont] Free Press. He began at the paper in 2000 as a reporter, covering small towns throughout the state. He went on to cover other areas, such as crime, courts and large towns, before joining the editing team at the paper.

As the associate editor, the No. 2 position in the newsroom, he now coordinates the paper’s day-to-day operation. The publication uses a web-first model, in which reporters are expected to break news, use social media, conduct video storytelling and provide frequent updates online. The print edition serves as a tool of depth, offering investigative and narrative journalism as well as vibrant photography and innovative design.

Through all of these changes in his career and to the publication, Silverman said writing remains the most important thing in his newsroom. “Good writing in all forms connects writers with readers,” he said. “Whether you’re crafting a piece of long-form journalism or a tweet, your audience will respond to a piece of writing that is accessible, clear and that matters to them.”

Silverman said students who want to work in any area of media should work to become well-rounded individuals who possess quality writing and thinking skills. “There is no doubt these skills are transferrable to other professions—probably any other profession that values clear writing, strong communicating and critical thinking,” he said. “These talents are applicable inside and outside of journalism, including fields such as public relations and advertising. Someone who can write well, is adept at social media and can shoot photos and video can thrive in newspapers, television and web-only pursuits, to say nothing of taking those skills with them should they ever want to leave those areas.”

The most important aspects he seeks in his staff are clarity and brevity, he said, as these attributes allow writers to find the crucial elements of a piece and convey them quickly and effectively.

“A good writer needs to filter the signal from the noise,” he said. “That’s always been true in journalism, but rarely has it been more important to avoid ‘notebook-dumping’ than it is today. Although the internet offers infinite space for stories of seemingly endless length, readers lack the patience to spend that much time with a story. And stories rarely need to be extensive tomes. Our job is to boil down, to strip jargon, to make complicated issues accessible and understandable.”

One Last Thing
Q: If you could tell students anything about media writing or anything you have seen in your time in the field, what would it be?
A: Write tight. Simplify. Be clear. Avoid pronouns, complicated sentences, passive voice and negative constructions as much as possible. Think about narrative—times when narrative voice works and times when you should seek an alternate approach. Speak with an editor early and often; work collaboratively; file an early draft; and hang around until after your edit. Your editors, and your readers, will be grateful.

THE INVERTED PYRAMID

If you think about the stories you have heard from childhood until today, chances are most of them were told chronologically. Fairytales that start with “Once upon a time” and end with “And they all lived happily ever after” are a perfect example of how we tell stories from beginning to end in the order in which events occurred.
Media writing forces you to break from that mold and make choices about which pieces of information matter most. In writing for the media, you need to write your content in a way that starts with the most important thing and then moves to the second most important thing and then the third most important thing and so forth. This format is called the inverted pyramid.

**FIGURE 4.1** The inverted pyramid moves through chunks of information in descending order of importance. In this illustration, you can see how the most important elements rise to the top, with elements of lesser value moving down toward the bottom of the piece.

Legend has it that the inverted pyramid became a popular news format during the Civil War, when lines of communication were shaky and editors feared losing touch with their reporters. To make sure the important information about the battles made it from the field to the newsroom, reporters would supposedly transmit their stories backward, starting with the outcome of the battle. They would then outline the number of casualties, the turning point of the battle and so forth. This approach gave the newspaper the key pieces of the story in case the transmission was interrupted.

Whether accurate or merely a part of journalism lore, the idea behind that legend helps outline the importance of telling your story in descending order of importance. If you place the best information near the top of whatever you write, you will improve the chances that a reader will see that information and continue to read your work. In addition, people who read material written in this format can stop at any point and not feel lost or uninformed.

In the digital age, the inverted pyramid has become more popular than ever. People often lack the time to do long and detailed reads of winding narratives and instead want to just know the basics. This approach allows you to tell a reader who won a game, when a big sale will occur or why someone should participate in a charity event, in a simple and efficient manner. A basic inverted-pyramid piece can work well on the front page of a newspaper, the top of a press release or as an alert delivered on a mobile device.
The inverted pyramid is a helpful tool during both the writing and information-gathering processes. The ability to focus on what matters most will allow you to determine what information you have and what information you need to find. In some ways, you can use the format like a shopping list built from a recipe: You know what should go into the final product, so you need to find those elements.

You can also use this approach after you have finished your writing. When you go through your work, use the inverted pyramid as your guide to determine what information you have and what you need. This will help you find the holes associated with your work, and it will also help you keep your eye on your audience as you build your piece.

For example, if you were constructing a press release that celebrates the hiring of your company’s president, you would likely interview the president of the company, the outgoing president and a few other key organizational members. As you go through the release, you notice how several sources have attributed the president’s work ethic to her favorite high school teacher. That ends up becoming part of your lead and works as a thread throughout the release. That’s when you notice the hole: You didn’t think to ask the name of the teacher. At that point, you can go back to your source and get the name. Maybe you can take it a step further and interview that teacher.

When you can rely on the inverted pyramid to help you organize your thoughts, you can improve the likelihood that you will remember to cover the most important areas of your piece and plug any holes you find.

**GIVE IT A TRY:** Here are several statements that have holes in them. Find each hole and then write a sentence that would "fill" the hole.

1. When Seattle Mariners pitcher Felix Hernandez threw a perfect game on Aug. 15, 2012, he became the third pitcher that season to achieve that feat.
2. The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, in which 26 people died, was the deadliest school shooting on U.S. soil since 2007.
3. People wishing to donate money to the American Red Cross can do so through the group’s website.
4. According to delish.com, you can make sugar cookies with three ingredients.
5. Billionaire and media icon Oprah Winfrey noted that one of her teachers was the person who created a spark for learning in her and inspired her to become a talk show host and entrepreneur.

**LEADS: THE PROMINENCE OF IMPORTANCE**

The lead of an inverted-pyramid piece is meant to capture as much important information as possible. You need to include everything that would matter to people and would entice them to read on. It has to be brief, and yet it has to be laden with information. In many cases, writing a lead can feel as difficult as trying to carry sand in a pasta strainer. Here are some helpful things to think about when you write a lead:

**“What Matters Most?” 5W’s and 1H and More**

Leads traditionally have a focus on the who, what, when, where, why and how of a piece. This is a simple way to hunt through the facts and interview material you gathered for the most valuable information. However, just because something has the 5W’s and 1H in there, it doesn’t necessarily follow that you have a good lead. Here’s an example:

*A 45-year-old woman, whose family needed milk and eggs, paid for her groceries with cash Wednesday morning at Hometown Foods.*
In terms of capturing those six elements, this lead is perfect. It has the who (45-year-old woman), what (paid for her groceries), when (Wednesday morning), where (Hometown Foods), why (her family needed milk and eggs) and how (with cash). However, it lacks the underlying aspect of what makes a lead worthwhile: valuable information.

When you build your lead, ask yourself, “What would matter most to my readers?” In other words, “Where is the value and how can I condense it into one sentence?” To answer this question, overlay the interest elements outlined in Chapter 1 (fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact) on the story you are trying to tell. Then rely on these elements as you look for ways to show the readers personal value in an interesting way.

**Build With the Basics**

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the core of a sentence comes down to the noun and the verb (or in some cases, the noun-verb-object trinity). However, most people write sentences the same way they tell stories, which is chronologically. We start at the beginning and work our way through the end of the sentence.

Instead, look for the “who did what to whom” core of your sentence and write that first. If nothing else, it will take care of two of your W’s and give you a sense of the focal point of your lead. Then answer the where and the when to emphasize immediacy and geography for your audience. How and why are always tough questions to answer, so if one or both of them drop out of the lead, it isn’t the end of the world. That said, you can’t get too far into the rest of your piece before you answer those questions.

Here is an example of building a lead outward from the core:

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A fire destroyed a house on Smith Street caused by an electrical problem Wednesday night. No one was home.
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We start at the core with the most important information: Fire destroys home. We then move outward into other interesting elements that touch on the remaining 5W’s and 1H: What caused the fire, where it happened, if anyone was around and when it occurred. This allows us to better prioritize what elements must make it into the lead and also gives us a sense of what things can move into a second paragraph if we don’t have the room for all of these elements.

**Lead Length and Readability**

The length of the average lead for an inverted-pyramid piece should be about 25 to 35 words. (Leads for broadcast news stories, professional-to-professional communication and ad copy follow different rules.) A good rule of thumb is to read the lead out loud to see how
it sounds and how it feels. If you are running out of air when you get to the end of your lead, the sentence might be too long. If you have to take a second breath, it is definitely too long.

Reading your lead aloud can also help you determine the flow, pace and general feel of your lead. As you read the lead aloud, you can find errors in structure and grammar that might otherwise escape you, such as pairing a plural noun with a singular verb or omitting a key word. If the sentence sounds smooth and you have no problem saying it, you have crafted a well-structured sentence with good flow. If you feel like you have a mouthful of marbles when you try to say the sentence, you have issues that need correction.

You can also determine whether the lead has too many ideas in it. If you think about the word count in terms of a lead’s length, you can think about its readability in terms of “weight.” If a lead has too much going on in it, the sentence can feel heavy and unwieldy as you read it aloud. Your vocabulary choice can also make your lead feel heavy. If you feel like you are reading a “word a day” calendar instead of a lead sentence, you need to edit your work to improve the readability.

**TYPES OF LEADS**

Leads are like any other tool you have available to you: If you use the right tool for the right job, you will succeed. If you pick the wrong one, your work can become frustrating to you and your readers. Leads for inverted-pyramid stories that rely on the 5W’s and 1H are usually called **summary leads**, in that you are summarizing what happened and explaining why it matters to your readers. Beyond that general term, here are some more nuanced ways of defining lead types and instances in which you can use them effectively:

**Name-Recognition Leads**

As mentioned in Chapter 1’s discussion of **FOCII**, fame is an important element when it comes to attracting audiences. The more well known someone is, the more likely that person’s name will draw readers. **Name-recognition leads** draw on this principle and put the famous person’s name at the front of the lead:

*President Donald Trump announced Thursday.*

*Pope Francis said Friday.*

*Chancellor David Smith will attend.*

Use this lead when you think the audience will know the name of someone right away with little or no context. If you are unsure how easily your readers will recognize this person by name, consider taking a different approach.

**Interesting-Action Leads**

In many cases, the “what” is more intriguing than the “who” when it comes to the lead. For this situation, you want to use an action-based lead in which you delay identifying the person by name and focus more on what the person did or what happened to that person. In many cases, a name will not matter to readers:
BAD: Chester B. Monroe was arrested Sunday on suspicion of assault at the Springfield County Fair.

When you use a name in a lead, readers should not think to themselves, “Wait, who is that guy? Should I know him?” By delaying the name of the person and instead giving some descriptors, you can better draw in your readers:

BETTER: A 43-year-old Springfield man was arrested Sunday on suspicion of assault at the county fair.

The biggest thing about an interesting-action lead, however, is to explain as clearly as possible what should make that action interesting to your readers:

GOOD: A 43-year-old Springfield man was arrested Sunday after police say he punched a carnival worker who refused to give him a stuffed bear toy.

Interesting-action leads are also helpful when you have multiple people involved in something and none of them are well known:

Seven Marconi High School student athletes received full rides to Division I schools, marking the largest number of sports scholarships in school history, Principal Mack Davis said.

In each case, you should name the people shortly after the lead, particularly in the case when one person will be the focal point of the piece. If you think the action will attract more people than the name of any one individual, use this approach.
Event Leads

Whether you are planning them or reporting on them, events are the staple of media writing in many ways. As a PR practitioner who writes about events, you might need to promote the event, gather an audience or gain reporters’ attention. As a reporter, you might need to tell people about one thing that is important to them out of the dozen items a group discussed. In any case, an event lead can help you locate what matters most and tell your readers about it.

When you write an event lead, focus on what happened at the event, not the event itself. Pieces about meetings or speeches that include the phrase “held a meeting” or “gave a speech” miss the point. Look at the examples below:

AWFUL: The Smithville College Board of Trustees held a meeting Wednesday where the board members discussed increasing tuition.

This lead needs help because (a) it starts with a “held a meeting” element, and (b) it doesn’t tell the readers what happened with the tuition discussion. Is tuition going up or not? This lead doesn’t tell us, and that’s probably what most readers would want to know.

BAD: The Smithville College Board of Trustees held a meeting Wednesday and decided to increase tuition by $500 per student.

This lead has the same problem as above in terms of relying on the “held a meeting” angle to tell the story. If you see a lead that tells you someone “held a meeting and…,” whatever comes after “and” is probably where you will find the most important information.

BETTER: The Smithville College Board of Trustees decided Wednesday to increase tuition by $500 per student.

This works out fairly well, with a noun-verb structure (trustees decided) and an explanation of what is most newsworthy. However, it keeps the focus on the board of trustees as opposed to the audience. If you can rework this to address the audience members’ self-interest, you will have a much stronger lead.

GOOD: Students at Smithville College will pay $500 more to attend school this year, the board of trustees decided Wednesday.

This one is the best of the bunch, although it could be better. It shifts the focus to the audience and it sticks with the active voice approach. If you wrote this for the student paper at Smithville College, a lot of people would see value in your story.

Second-Day Leads

Even if you aren’t writing for news, the word “new” has value to you. As noted in Chapter 1, immediacy is important to your readers, so the fresher the information, the better your piece will be. You want to give your readers the most recent information at the top of whatever you are writing.

When you are conducting a public-relations campaign, you can notify the public of your goal for the campaign with an event-style lead in your first news release.

In memory of a pledge who died of cancer last year, the Alpha Beta fraternity will attempt to collect $10,000 this month for a scholarship in that student’s name.
This lead is simple and tells the story of what the group hopes to accomplish. The next release, however, can't start the same way, because it will confuse readers and rely on old information to tell the story. This is where the second-day lead can be helpful as you update information for your audience. Consider these leads:

**AWFUL:** In memory of a pledge who died of cancer last year, the Alpha Beta fraternity launched a fundraiser last week to collect $10,000 this month for a scholarship in that student's name.

**BAD:** Five days ago, the Alpha Beta fraternity launched its charity fundraiser for the James Simpson Memorial Scholarship fund, with a goal of $10,000.

**GOOD:** In the first five days of its charity drive for the James Simpson Memorial Scholarship, the Alpha Beta fraternity has raised more than half of its $10,000 goal.

Notice that the awful lead has done nothing to update the story or even tell readers something beyond what they learned in the initial lead. The bad lead has more news in it than the awful lead, but it still doesn't tell your readers anything of interest or really provide additional information. The good lead focuses on something new and of interest: how the fundraising is progressing.

When the campaign finally comes to a close, you want one more release that again uses a second-day approach to inform your readers of what happened.

**BAD:** The Alpha Beta fraternity attempted to raise $10,000 this month to commemorate a student who died of cancer last year.

**BETTER:** The monthlong fundraiser for the James Simpson Memorial Scholarship came to a close tonight, with the group more than reaching its goal of $10,000.

**GOOD:** The Alpha Beta fraternity collected $31,083 in one month for the James Simpson Memorial Scholarship, more than tripling its stated goal.

The bad lead has the primary problem associated with all of the earlier bad and awful leads: It doesn't tell us anything new. The better lead answers the big question: Did the fraternity meet its goal? (Yes.) However, what makes the good lead the best of the bunch is it provides an exact figure ($31,083) and context (more than triple the initial goal) for the fundraising drive.

You can reshape each of those second-day leads to better emphasize certain aspects of the story or to draw attention to certain interest elements. However, in each case, it is clear that you must put the focus where it belongs: on the newest information.

**PROBLEMATIC LEADS AND POTENTIAL FIXES**

Throughout this chapter, we have discussed the way in which you have to shift your writing from a chronological format to a value-driven format. Doing this can make you feel uncomfortable and thus drive you to some bad lead-writing choices.

In most cases, you have the right idea in your head for a lead but you don't know exactly how to say it, so you fall back on weak devices and well-worn clichés to do the job for you. This is particularly problematic in public relations, where your audience is filled with other writers who are ready to rip you to shreds, and in advertising, where clarity and innovation are crucial.
Here are a series of problematic leads and a few suggestions on how to improve them. These leads aren’t taboo in the sense that you should never use them, but before you choose one of these, you should carefully consider other options.

“**You**” Leads

Some areas of media writing are more or less forgiving about the use of second person. Broadcast journalism is an interpersonal medium, with the anchor or reporter delivering the news in a way that bonds directly to the individual audience members. Thus, the use of “you” isn’t as jarring. Newspapers tend to avoid “you,” as reporters see second-person writing as sacrificing their objectivity. In advertising, the “you” is often implied in the call to action: You should buy this product.

The big problem with “**you**” leads occurs when they become opinionated and presumptuous. The writer assumes that all readers will react to a situation in the same way or that the writer’s value system is the same as the readers’.

*The Interfraternity Council is hosting a blood drive at the union Friday, and you should donate.*

On its face, the lead seems straightforward and supportive of a good idea. However, this presupposes that everyone can donate blood. Certain restrictions in terms of health, lifestyle, international travel and body size can prohibit some people from donating. Other people might have a serious fear of needles or a propensity to faint, thus making them unwilling to take part. However, the writer essentially is commanding people to skip past all of these issues and get to the blood drive right away.

Instead of approaching the lead this way, you can use a third-person approach and focus more on broader goal-oriented actions.

*The Interfraternity Council is asking students to attend Friday’s blood drive in hopes of breaking last year’s collection record of 300 pints.*

In another instance, you could use an anecdote or exemplar to draw in your readers.

*When he was 8 years old, Beta Theta Pi member Karl Anderson nearly died after severing an artery in his leg while on a camping trip.*

“The only difference between life and death for me was that someone had donated blood earlier that week in my area,” he said. “I lost four pints and if a couple people hadn’t taken time to donate, I’d have been a goner.”

*Now the chairman of the Interfraternity Council, Anderson said his goal is to host at least one blood drive on the campus each semester and bring in more donations in each successive event.*

*The group is hosting a blood drive Friday at the union with a goal of exceeding 300 pints.*

“I know that not everyone can donate,” he said. “But people who can, I really hope they do.”

Obviously this is more than a single lead paragraph, but you can see how the example can develop into several sentences on a common theme before getting into the nuts and bolts of the event itself.
Question Leads

Journalism is about questions and answers: You ask questions of your sources, and you report their answers to your audience members. When you use a question lead, you mix up the process.

Question leads often fail because they presuppose that all of your readers would answer in the same way.

Did you ever wonder what it would be like to live in a penthouse in New York City? You're not alone!

This lead presupposes that all readers would see a New York City penthouse as a luxurious and coveted living option. However, if you have readers who hate crowds, love nature and disdain public transportation, you aren't going to hold on to them for very long.

Instead, get to the point of what you are trying to tell people in your lead and then move on.

New York City has seen a rise in penthouse rentals and purchases from small-town, Midwestern buyers who say they want to live the life of big-city celebrities.

A second problem with a question lead comes when you use it in advertising copy, because it heightens the suspicions of your readers.

Wouldn't you like a simple way to feel more energized without having to sleep as much?

Chances are, readers will view this as a come-on akin to the hucksters in the Old West who sold snake oil out of the back of a covered wagon. Instead of asking a question, show your readers you have the ability to support your claim.

People who took XYZ tablets reported feeling more energized while sleeping 1.4 hours less per day, according to a Harvard University study of 1,000 individuals.

Quote Leads

It's not a crime to own a “Quote a Day” calendar, but it shouldn't be your journalistic muse. You can admire the verbal offerings of Albert Einstein, Nelson Mandela or Selena Gomez, but you shouldn't make them the focal point of your lead. This also applies to quoting song lyrics, Bible verses and dictionary definitions.

If you want to capture the essence of a piece, just use a standard lead to tell your readers what happened. If you have a more emotionally driven piece, consider using observation or source anecdotes to make your point.

The problems associated with a quote lead also apply to quotes from your sources. (You can learn more about sources in Chapter 5 and more about quotes in Chapter 10.) When you start with a quote, your readers can feel as if they walked into the middle of a conversation.

“I knew I had to kill it by myself. I really didn't want to but nobody else seemed willing, so I grabbed my stick and went to work.”
This lead could be the beginning of a horrifying confession of how a serial killer began his bloody career or it could be a story about a gutsy hockey player trying to keep the opposing team from scoring during a penalty situation. In either case, the readers are going to be confused until they get deeper into your piece.

Instead of doing this, start with an anecdote that leads into the quote:

Right winger John Jacoby had played all but three shifts in the state finals on a badly bruised thigh and said the last thing he wanted to do was go out for the final two minutes of a one-goal game.

However, when the team’s top penalty killer was whistled for high-sticking, Jacoby said he did what he always does: He gutted it out.

“I knew I had to kill it by myself,” he said. “I really didn’t want to but nobody else seemed willing, so I grabbed my stick and went to work.”

After this, you can add a paragraph that leads your readers into whatever the rest of the story is: a profile of Jacoby, a recap of the state finals or something else that attaches itself to this story.

“Imagine” Leads

Unless you are writing about the John Lennon song, you want to avoid an “imagine” lead. First, it is a cliché and a particularly bad one, since you are putting the onus on your readers to do the work for you. Second, it can be problematic if your readers aren’t imagining what you are imagining.

Here’s a lead for a promotional piece on a new residence hall set up at a university:

Imagine living in a dorm room complete with a refrigerator, stove, washer/dryer combo and private bathroom.

For students who are currently sharing a room and a community bathroom, that might sound great. For nontraditional students who have a house of their own, this would really cramp their style.

Perhaps the most problematic thing about “imagine” leads is that if something is imaginary, why are you writing about it? In most cases, you probably have a real-life example that would serve better as an attention-getter.

Imagine being homeless at the age of 5 with no family and having to fight just to survive.

This is a situation most readers probably haven’t faced, so it’s tough for them to imagine. It’s also likely that they won’t stick with the story long enough to find out what is behind that “imaginary” moment.

Instead of telling people to imagine something, show them the reality:

James Carver was born to a drug-addicted mother, abandoned at a church by age 2 and homeless by age 5. During his time on the streets, he slept on a sewer grate to stay warm, fought rats for scraps of food and got his clothing out of thrift-store dumpsters.

Then get to the point of why we are reading about this person by the third or fourth paragraph. He might be speaking at your school, raising money for charity or graduating as a valedictorian of his class.
HOW TO ORDER THE REST OF YOUR PYRAMID

If you have constructed your lead well, you can use it as a road map to help you work your way through the rest of the piece. If you wrote a weak or problematic lead, you will feel as though you are putting a square peg into a round hole for the next several paragraphs. Here are some things that can help you figure out what should come next in your writing:

Determine the Value of Each Fact

The lead will have the majority of the things that matter most in it. Your job at this point is to wade through what remains and make some choices about what will make the cut and what won’t. This will help remove a lot of superfluous material and give you a better chance to get a handle on the remaining information. This will also help you figure out if you are missing any crucial pieces that you need to find before you can continue writing.

Consider the following facts from the Department of Transportation regarding an upcoming project:

1. The Interstate 12 project will begin March 5 and take six months to complete.
2. H&J builders have been contracted to complete the job.
3. The total job will cost $4.3 million.
4. The project will replace the current road surface with more tire-friendly pavement.
5. Approximately 42,000 travelers use this road each day.
6. Starting April 6, the interstate will be closed for the duration of the project.

If you could include only three facts from this list in the piece you want to write, you would need to see which facts will matter most to your readers. If you work for a local newspaper, the sixth and fifth facts will likely make the cut, with some discussion of the third and fourth fact for the final spot on your list. If you work for the H&J Construction Newsletter or the company’s promotional department, the second fact becomes crucial, while the first, third and fourth facts will also vie for a spot in your work. As you determine value for each fact, you should consider your audience’s needs and interests.

Support the Lead

As mentioned earlier, the lead serves as a road map for the rest of your piece, so every sentence that comes after the lead should aid it in telling the story. As you examine each fact, see how it relates to the lead and determine whether it helps drive home the point in that top sentence.

If you find that the story and the lead aren’t matching up, you have two options. On one hand, you can see if the piece made a wrong turn at some point and wandered away from the story you originally intended to tell. In a situation like this, you can go back to that point in the piece, correct the problem and get back on track.

On the other hand, you might find that the body of the piece holds more value than the lead does. If this is the case, you can rework the lead so it better fits with the tale you have told. In either case, the lead and the body need to fit together in a way that makes sense.
Descending Order of Importance

The inverted-pyramid structure dictates that you write your story in descending order of importance. This means that the most important bit of information after your lead goes second, the most important information after that goes third and so forth.

You might not be able to discern the overall importance of a particular fact at first glance, which is why doing a self-edit is important in the writing process. Once you have all of the pieces in what you think is the best possible order, go back and look through what you have done to make sure the order is right.

Think back to the list of facts on the Interstate 12 project and consider what order you would place all six of them in if you worked for the DOT or a local newspaper. If you used an inverted-pyramid structure, the fifth and sixth facts would likely be at the top, with the third fact probably staying put and the remaining facts going near the bottom. The two final facts will matter most to your readers, whether you use them as part of a press release or a news story.

In some cases, Fact A will need to precede Fact B for your readers to make sense of each fact. In other cases, you might find facts that take on a greater importance than you first afforded them, which will force you to reorder your facts to get them into the best possible order for your audience members.

Use Small Chunks

The structure of the inverted pyramid forces you to give people chunks of important information in rapid order. To do this without overwhelming your readers, you need to keep those chunks small. The structure relies primarily on one-sentence paragraphs, with a few two-sentence paragraphs thrown in when necessary. In some forms of writing, as you will see in Chapter 10 on print writing, you will have quotes that go longer than that, but these tend to be the exceptions rather than the rules.

Your eyes and your mind can feel overwhelmed when you scan a giant block of text. The small paragraphs, complete with their indents, can give your readers’ eyes little “footholds” like those on a rock-climbing wall and thus makes it easier for your readers to consume content.

Know When to Stop

The inverted pyramid moves from the most important information to the least important information you wish to convey to your readers. However, you don’t want to include information that is so low in value it bores your readers. This is where your ability to judge the importance of your facts comes into play. If you don’t include enough information, you will leave your readers confused. If you keep adding content for no good reason, you will create bored and disinterested audience members. News reporters often refer to the idea of writing too much as “notebook emptying,” referring to the notion that since they wrote a fact or a quote in their notes, they should include it in their stories.
You need to know when to stop writing. One of the better ways to do this is to examine each fact after you have placed it in your piece and ask if it adds something to the telling of the tale. If the fact is something that would benefit your readers, retain it. If not, cut it. If you have trouble determining this, ask a colleague to read it and give you a second opinion. It takes a lot of practice to figure out exactly where that line sits between too much and not enough information, so that second set of eyes can be helpful during your earliest drafts.

**CONNECT**

**WHY ARE YOU DOING WHAT YOU’RE DOING?**

In media writing, you don’t see a lot of right and wrong answers, but rather better and worse answers. The key to figuring out how to find more “better” answers and have fewer “worse” ones comes down to your thought process as a writer.

As you write your lead and order your paragraphs, consider the question “Why did I do that?” In most cases, when editors or managers question writers in this way, the writers worry that they have done something wrong. A better way of thinking about this question is to consider it a chance to justify your decisions.

In order to connect with the audience, you need to think about what the audience wants to know. This part often gets lost in the daily grind of cranking out copy. To better connect with the readers, you can start answering questions like “Why did you lead with that?” or “Why did you put that near the bottom?”

You need to have a reason behind why you think each piece matters and to what degree you think it does. When you finish writing, go back through you work and justify what you wrote and where you put it in terms of serving your audience. Make sure you can explain to yourself, or your boss, what you did and why you ordered it that way. This will help improve the overall value of your piece and help you reach your audience members on their level.

**GIVE IT A TRY:** Below are a series of facts on an accident. Place the facts in descending order of importance and then exchange your list with a classmate. See where you agree on the ordering and where you disagree. Justify your organization in hopes of coming to agreement on the best possible order.

- Springfield police responded to a report of a two-vehicle accident at Broadway and Sixth Avenue.
- Police said the driver of a white minivan drove through a stop sign without stopping.
- Traffic was delayed in all directions for 20 minutes because of the crash.
- The driver of the minivan was Jane Morris, a 35-year-old mother of three.
- The only passenger in the minivan, John Morris, the 38-year-old husband of Jane Morris, was killed in the crash.
- The driver of the other vehicle, a red Corvette, was Springfield Mayor Bob Commins.

You need to know when to stop writing. One of the better ways to do this is to examine each fact after you have placed it in your piece and ask if it adds something to the telling of the tale. If the fact is something that would benefit your readers, retain it. If not, cut it. If you have trouble determining this, ask a colleague to read it and give you a second opinion. It takes a lot of practice to figure out exactly where that line sits between too much and not enough information, so that second set of eyes can be helpful during your earliest drafts.

**THE BIG THREE**

Here are the three big things to take with you as you continue reading the book:

1. **The most important information goes first:** When you work in media writing, you want to take your best shot at getting your audience’s attention right up front. This means you need to give them everything that matters as quickly as possible. Don’t beat around the bush. Use the inverted-pyramid structure to give them the good stuff immediately.

2. **Rely on the basics:** The best way to have a strong sentence is to stick to the core of what makes a sentence work: noun-verb or noun-verb-object.
Start here when you build each sentence to make sure the core of the sentence is dealing with the issue you think is most important for that sentence. Then augment those pieces with additional information that has value to your readers.

3. **Know when to stop:** You can kill a good piece if you don’t know when to stop writing. Make sure that when you write, you know when you have run out of important things to say. If you do this, you will have tightly written pieces and grateful readers.

**KEY TERMS**

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Of the “killer be’s” outlined at the beginning of the chapter, which one do you think is most important, and which one do you think is least important? Why?
2. What are some of the benefits associated with writing in the inverted pyramid? What makes it hard for new journalists to write in this format?
3. Which of the “problem” leads is most bothersome to you as a reader? Why does it bother you and how would you recommend fixing those types of leads?
WRITE NOW!

1. Take the facts in the “Give It a Try” exercise above and create a lead sentence that is between 25 and 35 words long, contains the majority of the 5W’s and 1H and has value to the citizens of Springfield.

2. Select a fairytale or other well-known “once upon a time” story and rewrite it in the inverted-pyramid format. Start with a summary lead that focuses on the most important things in the story and then include three to five additional one-sentence paragraphs that provide content in descending order of importance.

3. Write a four-sentence piece based on a news story, press release or other piece of media writing. Remember to use a strong lead sentence and then one sentence per paragraph. Focus on ordering the information from most important to least important. Make sure the piece has solid flow and readability.

4. Select a story with a lead that uses one of the “problematic” devices noted earlier in the story. Rewrite the lead in a summary-lead format.

NOTE