In many newsrooms, editors will take one hard look at the lead of the article written by a reporter and decide whether the story will make it to the cover page or be relegated to the dark depths of the inside pages. That is why it is often said that a lead can make or break a story.

Journalism educators will tell you that summary leads are sacrosanct for breaking news stories and punch leads are to be avoided for soft features. But the only rule for writing a power-packed article is that there are no rules…just ensure it is interesting, packs a punch and leaves your reader transfixed.

This is especially true in today’s time when any news or information loses its breaking status by the time it reaches its readers in print form or even if you are analyzing it through online articles/blogs.  That is why it is not enough to just state facts in a lead when you write a piece. You have to make sure that it makes your reader take notice…. Do that and you’ve already won them over. To grab your reader’s attention, an imaginative lead often comes in handy, be it for talking about a tornado that hit a village or a bikers’ group that rides vintage wheels.

That said it is always better to follow some guidelines on the use of various leads when you are a beginner, so that you can ensure that those who read your story would be eager to go beyond the lead.

**The Different Types of leads –**

1. **Summary lead** – This is the most common and widely used lead especially in newspapers and most of us have come across these while browsing stories with the morning cuppa. These are straight leads that just state the facts and include the who, where, what, when, why and sometimes even the how of the event or happening. Traditionally, summary leads have been used to report breaking news or a developing story. Of late, most breaking news reaches us through electronic media or mobile much before the print form, so even if you apply the summary to your lead, it makes better sense to start with the why, what  and the how rather than the who, when and where.

For e.g. look at this lead of a recent news report –

A suspected al-Qaeda threat prompted the United States to issue a rare worldwide travel alert Friday, just a day after it announced that it would shutter 21 US embassies across the Muslim world this weekend.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-issues-worldwide-travel-alert-amid-terrorism-fears/2013/08/02/22b9c05e-fb84-11e2-a369-d1954abcb7e3_story.html>

The purpose of such leads is clear – to give specific information without wasting too much time. Straight leads need not be boring and can be made sharp and lively.

2. **Punch lead** – It uses strong verbs and short sentences that are meant to create an impact. The purpose of this type of lead is exactly that – giving a jolt so that readers will sit up and take notice.

E.g. — The President is dead.

The punch lead is most often used in news stories and can be used in news features where you want to convey a hard-hitting message to the readers or to reveal some high-voltage piece of information. To give an example, if you are writing an investigative story about a thick wooded forest that has been destroyed because of deforestation and construction activity, a lead simply saying “The trees are gone” or “the birds have flown away” will give the desired impact. But such leads should be used sparingly and only when the story warrants it otherwise it will look contrived. And if you decide to begin with such a lead, you should be sure to have equally impactful information in the paragraphs that follow otherwise your readers would be disappointed.

3. **The contrast lead** – This lead uses two different thoughts or two sentences that are exactly opposite to each other in the opening paragraph to make a strong statement. The contrast in the lead is employed to drive home the point about a particular event, person or happening. For e.g. pitting joy against sorrow, new against old, tragedy against happiness are some of the ways to do it. Just read the lead of this story to understand what I am talking about –

<http://www.bangaloremirror.com/article/125/201307242013072420151388769e4e0a0/-Iblur-Lake-has-seen-it-all-Water-to-weeds-and-trash-.html>

In this news report, the earlier lush state of the lake is compared to its present sorry state to drive home the point that it is dying and needs immediate attention. Contrast leads are used for all kind of stories – news, features, reviews etc but not often for breaking news.

4. **Anecdotal lead** – This one begins, as is obvious, with an anecdote. Often, an interesting anecdote can pull in the readers’ attention like no amount of statistics and straight narration of facts can. This kind of lead is rarely used for breaking news but works well for both soft stories and news-based features. But a word of caution, don’t get carried away with the anecdote and make a mess of the broader point that you want to talk about.

Investigative story — <http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2012/04/29/nursing_home_residents_with_dementia_often_given_antipsychotics_despite_health_warnings/?page=full>

Travel

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/travel/traveling-with-a-disability-in-europe/2013/07/25/0dc6ecea-c3f7-11e2-8c3b-0b5e9247e8ca_story.html>

5. **Descriptive lead** – As the name suggests, this type of lead goes into great detail to describe the scene or person that makes up the subject of the story. The idea is to create visual impact. So if you are writing a news report about a high-profile murder, instead of using a boring summary lead informing who was murdered and why, you could make the piece more impactful by graphically describing the crime scene.

Check out this news story which effectively uses a descriptive lead to convey the news about a mid-air crash –

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/fighter-jet-crash-leads-to-harrowing-ocean-rescue/2013/08/02/0a947162-fb8f-11e2-a369-d1954abcb7e3_story.html?hpid=z3>

Many leads do not really fall into particular categories but use the features of different types of leads to create a unique beginning. The following food review is an altered version of a summary lead but it also has elements of a descriptive one. What matters is that it makes for interesting reading. See for yourself – <http://www.washingtonpost.com/gog/restaurants/lauriol-plaza,792217.html>