Tips for Writing English News Leads

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ABSTRACT: News leads refer to the first one or two paragraphs of the news reports, delivering the most important and relevant information. And Writing the news leads is commonly regarded as the most difficult and challenging part of writing news stories. That is why most students are confused about how to write well standard English news leads. The paper is to give some tips or conventions for students to observe.

Donald Morison Murray, Pulitzer Prize winner, once said, "Three seconds and the reader decide to read or move on to the next story." It is a vivid illustration of successful or unsuccessful news leads. In other words, that is all the time you have to catch the reader’s glance and hold reader’s attention for the news writer. After reading the lead, the reader will make a critical decision, “Shall I read on? ”It depends on the leads.

As is known to us all, news leads refer to the first one or two paragraphs of the news reports, delivering the most important and relevant information. It often includes six elements, which are what, when, who, where, why and how (time, location, participants, event or action and circumstances). A lead should be as economical as possible in wording while providing information as rich as possible. This is the most challenging job. Here are some tips or formulas for fresh writers to follow.

1 A LEAD SHOULD CONTAIN THE ESSENCE OF THE STORY

A good news story, unlike the novel or play, is based on one main idea. It gives the reader a sense of completeness. The lead functions as abaited hook that lures the reader into the story. It should capture the essence of the whole news story, which encourages the reader to continue. For instance, do not mention a meeting being held and a lecture being given without highlighting its contents. Rather, you should often begin the lead with the contents.

Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech on "seeking common and sustainable development and being cooperative with win-win partnership" at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in the United Nations headquarters in New York on Sept. 26. www.china.org.cn

In this example, you may quickly identify what is mentioned in President’s speech in the United Nations. China’s position in the world development is clearly clarified, which the readers are most concerned.

2 A LEAD SHOULD BEGIN WITH THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF INFORMATION

The importance of this principle can never be overestimated. Readers should be able to obtain the essence of the story after reading the first half of the lead. The lead is problematic if they do not know what is being said until they reach the end of the lead. You should definitely avoid the following:

A van collided with a truck last night at the intersection of Road 203 and Yanshan Street, killing two people and injuring three.

Two people were killed and three injured as a van collided with a truck last night at the intersection of Road 203 and Yanshan Street.

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In the accident, the most important essence is “casualties,” which is the most concerned for readers. And then the elements like when and where to happen are followed.

3 A LEAD WRITER SHOULD TRY TO PLACE THE TIME ELEMENT BEFORE OR AFTER THE VERB

In most cases, there are several verbs in the lead. If we move the time element to the end of the sentence, it would be unclear for readers. It may confuse the reader if the time element stays too far from its verb.

China’s Ministry of Transport said on Wednesday that non-toll roads would account for
more than 96 percent of the country’s road mileage in the future. www.chinaview.cn

In this lead, there are two verbs, “said” and “account for”. It is very clear that the information was released on Wednesday because the time element is close to its verb, “said”.

4 A LEAD WRITER SHOULD ALWAYS AVOID EDITING AND TRY TO INDICATE THE SOURCE OF INFORMATION

As a news reporter, your job is to state the news facts. As for the judgment, it’s the readers’ job. That is why the writers try to avoid using such adjective words as “good,” “lovely”. The writers hide their emotional feelings. That is, they can only report what they see, hear and smell. People reported in the story can be free to express emotion, state opinions or make claims—in the direct quotations, but it’s not the writers’ views.

5 A LEAD WRITER SHOULD USE THE ACTIVE VOICE IF POSSIBLE

Active voice sentences are often more concise than passive voice ones. The active voice carries action and therefore is more effective than the passive voice.

The Supreme Court of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) on Friday sentenced a US citizen to 10 years of hard labor for alleged subversion and espionage activities. www.chinaview.cn

From this piece of news, it is easy and quick for readers to catch the core meaning.

6 A LEAD WRITER SHOULD TRY NOT TO CONFUSE THE READERS TOO MUCH DETAIL

It is a must for writers to remember one rule, that is, do not write the lead too long. Most readers try to steal some time to read news to keep them well-informed since they are occupied with their too much work. As a result, brevity is a very important element for a successful lead. According to the U.S. study, the number of words per sentence in the first paragraph is indeed kept within 26.1. It is more readable for news lovers. Do not force your readers to take a deep breath before reading the lead.

7 A LEAD SHOULD AVOID THE UNFAMILIAR NAMES TO THE READER

Prominence is one of the six news values. Prominence refers to two aspects: news figure or news fact, one of which can trigger readers’ interest. Readers will feel uncomfortable with the unfamiliar names in the lead.

President Xi Jinping, speaking on the South China Sea issue on Thursday, said China upholds the peaceful resolution of disputes through friendly consultation and negotiation with the countries directly involved. www.chinadaily.com.cn

In this example, it is easy to know that the name of individual is well known and it is the essence of the news story. In that case, this lead begins with the name.

A FM spokeswoman says the US is not qualified to make carping comments on China as it has not signed on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. www.chinadaily.com.cn

In the second example, readers just care about the news facts. As for the specific person, who released the national policy, readers pay more attention to his status which can soon establish the news credibility. However, it doesn’t matter even if his specific name remains unknown to readers.

In conclusion, a lead is the key to any successful news story. It is just like an alluring invitation for readers. Try to study the rules of news lead and get ready for hard work.

REFERENCES

[1] Ding Yanren, Yu Xi, English news Writing, 2014