# **Writing Effective Leads–12 Different Approaches**

20**FEB**

As you get ready to write your article (whether it’s for a magazine, newsletter, newspaper, or website), you will probably first consider how you want to START it.

The first impression you give is of upmost importance, after all. You want to start an article with a catchy lead, capturing the reader’s attention from the get-go.



Here are 12 different techniques to consider using for the next lead you write:

1. *Summary Lead*

A summary lead — which is sometimes thought of as the straight news lead — states the key point of the article. (For example: “Howard B. Unruh, 28, a mild, soft-spoken veteran of battles in Italy, France and Germany, killed 12 people with a war souvenir Luger pistol in his home block in East Camden Tuesday morning. He wounded four others.”)

2. *Direct Address Lead*

A lead that is a direct address to readers — a “you” lead — is calculated to induce them to continue reading because it involves them to some degree. (“If you have a shape like a pear, don’t let it bother you. You are more likely to succeed in life than most people.”)

3. *Anecdotal Lead*

An anecdotal lead tells a real-life story that illustrates the point of the article. While not always the case, anecdotal leads can be emotionally charged (poignant or humorous, for example). (“It’s the night before Sarah’s wedding. The images she’d dreamed of for years — the perfect dress, the meaningful vows, the sumptuous cake — now seem to reside only in the land of fairy tales. Her bridesmaids are fighting, her groom hasn’t reported on the state of his vows, and the wrong flowers were ordered. Thinking of the disarray around her, Sarah bursts into tears. This isn’t the way her wedding day is supposed to be.”)

4. *Descriptive Lead*

A descriptive lead describes a person, place, or event. It transports readers immediately to the location or helps them “see” the setting of the subject the article will be about. ( “The long line of Khaki-clad youths stood at attention. The last notes of a bu­gle across the parade ground floated through the late-afternoon light. In the dis­tance, a warm window light shone, and John Henry felt a lump growing in his throat.”)

5. *Why Lead*

A why lead emphasizes the “cause” and is combined with the “what.” ( “They told Williard Johnson he’d never be a football player. After all, he had only one leg.”)

6. *Unbelievable Lead*

An unbelievable lead grabs the reader’s attention by revealing something startling. The reader will say, “I almost can’t believe that,” and then will want to continue reading to find out more. (“Five out of 100 people have an extra rib. Every three days a human stomach gets a new lining. The record for the loudest burp is 118 decibels, which is as loud as a chainsaw.”)

7. *Cliché Lead*

A cliché lead takes a familiar saying and puts a twist on it. The saying must be related to the theme of the article. Avoid bro­mides, platitudes, and triteness. (“A picture may be worth a thousand words, but it’s not worth much of anything if it’s out of focus.”)

8. *Contrast Lead*

A contrast lead combines two or more antithetic elements to make an idea more significant or interesting. (“School teachers went on strike this fall for the third time in eight years, but the city’s 62,000 public school pupils were told to report to class.”)

9. *Quotation Lead*

A quotation in the lead can draw readers into the ar­ticle. The quotation, though, should be brief and part of the gist of the article — and, most importantly, it should be powerful enough that it deserves being used in the lead. Don’t just use just any quote. (“One evening in January when their children were in bed, Richard and Eu­genia Smith sat before their television set, talking. ‘All right,’ Richard said coolly, in re­sponse to an accusation from his wife. ‘I don’t love you, I haven’t for some time, and I want a divorce.’”)

10. *Figurative Lead*

Metaphors, similes, and other figures of speech may be used in a lead. Be certain, though, to avoid triteness and banality. (“The colorful dark horse wearing a white rose, running headlong into the election of 1872, hoped to buck the ‘superiority of man’ harness off America’s women.”)

11. *Question Lead*

A good question lead makes readers want to know the answer. Don’t ask a frivolous question. Choose one that provokes your reader’s curiosity. (“Were the best presidents of the United States the sickest ones?”)

12. *Combination Lead*

Leads may combine two or more of the preceding types of leads. You might, for example, combine an anecdotal lead with a question lead. Such a lead would present readers with a real-life situation and then ask if they have ever been through a similar experience. Or you could combine a quotation lead with a direct address lead … or you could use any other combination of lead types.