LEADS CHECKLIST

1. ENTICE: Does the lead entice the reader to continue reading?

2. FOCUS: Does the lead draw the reader to the focus (nut graph) of the story?

3. FOreshadow: Does the lead give a hint about something that will come later in the story?

4. GRABber: Is the lead a "grabber," as Miami Herald police reporter, Edna Buchanan, would say. Her definition of a good lead is one that "causes the reader at his breakfast table to spit up his coffee, clutch at his heart and shout, 'My God! Martha, did you read this?'"

5. MOM: Does the lead pass the "tell it to Mom" principle? Is it worded clearly enough in the way that you would tell the story to your mother or a friend?

6. SO WHAT: Does the lead pass the who cares test? Does it give the reader a reason to continue reading the story?

7. BACKUP: Does the lead have backup in the story?
Newswriting tips

NEWS JUDGMENT:

- The key to good newswriting is recognizing what is newsworthy. You need to have a "nose for news."

- With breaking news about deaths, injuries, destruction and the like, it should be obvious what the news is.

- With government or meeting stories, the reader will want to know what happened, what the governing body decided. That's the news.

- In stories about speeches, news conferences and other general news stories, you will have to decide what is the most important or newsworthy thing that was said. Even if none of the information was of interest to you, or the speaker was dull or whatever, you still have to be creative enough to build an interesting news story around the information that you have.

- With human interest and "softer" news such as the weather, you can look for a more off-beat or quirky angle. But you still need to impart news to the reader. The reader may well be entertained by your story, but you have to be sure that person also has been informed.

LEADS:

- The lead of a news story should entice the reader with colorful language and an interesting angle to make the person want to know more.

- Although there are exceptions, your leads should be no longer than four to 4 1/2 type-written lines or 25 to 35 words. Until you get used to writing leads, you may want to go back and count the number of words you use in each one. In general, hyphenated words or multiple-word titles can count as one word.

- As you gather or receive information for a news story, you should already be thinking about what is the most important or news worthy aspect. Whatever you determine is most important will most likely be your lead.

- Once you have determined what is most important, you should then think of a simple, straight forward way of telling other people what happened.

- Colorful language and active verbs can help make this information more enticing for the reader. But remember, do not give away the entire story in your lead. If you do, the reader will have no incentive or reason for reading on or listening further.
• Once you have crafted a lead, you should read it back to see if it reads smoothly and does not require you to take repeated breaths in order to complete the sentence. If you find that you can’t finish reading your lead back in one breath, chances are it is too long.

• Be concise, precise and accurate.

HERE ARE SOME SAMPLE LEADS

A story about a family’s efforts to keep a goat at their home despite city regulations outlawing such pets could have opened:

Los Angeles city officials have ordered Elaine Perez and her family to remove their pet goat from their home by Friday.

This lead is acceptable but it is much more creative for the writer and interesting to the reader the way one reporter handled the story’s lead.

The Perez family pet is about as big as a dog and he drinks from a Budweiser bottle.
But he’s no Spuds McKenzie and he doesn’t have many fans in City Hall.
Chico is an 18-month-old Pygmy goat who lives with the Perez family on 138th Street. But city officials say Chico violates the zoning code, which prohibits livestock in most residential areas.
Elaine Perez has been ordered to remove Chico by today.

A story about Orange County Sheriff Brad Gates getting a reprieve from contempt-of-court charges for releasing prisoners early due to jail overcrowding could have began:

Orange County Superior Court Judge Eileen Moore Thursday rescinded a contempt-of-court order against Sheriff Brad Gates.

This is okay. What one reporter did with this information is better:

Sheriff Brad Gates’ prospects of being locked up in his own jail vanished Thursday when a judge threw out a contempt-of-court conviction and 30-day sentence he received for illegally releasing prisoners.

When possible, your lead also should give perspective to the story. For example:

More than three years after he shot and paralyzed his former girlfriend, Bradley Ackerman pleaded guilty Thursday to attempted murder without premeditation.

On a story about an ongoing political battle over whether advertising should be allowed on a state-funded news station for teen-agers, the writer opened with:
In the midst of a noisy fight on the political playground, Channel One has quietly slipped into some Sacramento classrooms. Channel One - a national news program for teens that's controversial because of its advertising - is avoiding the battle locally because it only is being shown in private schools, so far.

Here is an interesting approach to what could have been a routine story about cutback's in state funding for driver education programs in public high schools:

Imagine a world where a 16-year-old has to live without a driver's license. Christopher Roberts can't. "They have to have their mother or their father take them everywhere," said the Downey High School sophomore. "If they want to go to a girlfriend's house, they have to have their mother take them."

And here is a good summary lead on an election campaign story:

A scrappy incumbent fighting for his political life, a stunning last-minute council vote and reverberations from January's earthquake are the political wild cards that could help decide the November elections for Santa Monica City Council.

Despite everything you will read and learn about writing news leads and news stories this semester, there are always exceptions that work.

For example, Edna Buchanan, a Pulitzer Prize winning police reporter for the Miami Herald newspaper has been widely praised for her unconventional approach to writing leads for crime stories. Her lead on a story about a man named Gary Robinson, who ordered a three-piece box of chicken at a fast food restaurant but was shot and killed by a security guard after he slugged a waitress who told him they were out of chicken, is among her most famous:

"Gary Robinson died hungry," it states simply.

- In the ideal news story, your lead should set the stage for everything that follows. And from there, each paragraph should unfold out of the one above and your quotes, when applicable, should add life and color to the rest of the story.

- Lastly, you have to know when the news is so serious, and so important that you simply need to use a good, hard lead and "cut to the chase" as it were. The news you have to tell is so compelling that it doesn't need any help from the writer.

For example:

A windblown wild fire fueled by dry brush whipped through the fashionable Oakland and Berkeley hills Sunday, killing 10 people, destroying more than 200
homes and forcing the evacuation of thousands of people in one of the worst brush fires in Bay Area history.

Or:

A twin-engine airplane crashed into a residential neighborhood moments after taking off from Long Beach Airport Saturday morning, killing both people aboard and narrowly missing four homes.