

## **Lead Writing Tipsheet**

By Doug Cospers

### **A hard news lead:**

- Is the first sentence or paragraph of news stories
- Captures the ESSENCE of your story.
- Answers the question: WHAT IS THE STORY?
- Hooks the reader and pulls him into the story. Remember, the easiest decision a reader can make is not to read your story.
- Is the most important sentence in journalism. Journalists are only as good as their leads.

### **Check list for writing clear, powerful news leads:**

- First ask, “What is the story?”
- Include only essential information. Most details belong lower in the story.
- Try to express only one thought, usually in one sentence.
- Keep them short and sweet – 25-35 words.
- Keep your sentence structure simple -- subject-verb-object.
- Write in past tense.
- Use the active voice when possible.
- Always include the time element in hard news leads.
- Try to write your lead before continuing with your story. If you can’t write your lead, you probably have not done enough reporting.
- If you get stuck on your lead on deadline, imagine that your mother or wife or husband asks you when you get home from work, “What story did you work on today, dear?” The answer is probably your lead.

### **Remember:**

- Journalism is founded on the principles of accuracy, fairness and balance. These principles also apply to writing leads.
- No matter how skilled a writer you are, you cannot make a good story out of a bad idea.
- No matter how skilled a writer you are, you cannot write a good story unless you have done the reporting well.
- Think of writing as a process. Finding good ideas is writing. Reporting is writing. The actual act of writing is only the last step in a longer process of creation.