Chapter 9

The soft-news lead

If the hard-news lead is the essential skill that must be learned by all aspiring news writers, sooner or later they will all be asked to write a soft news story. What should a writer do when hard news goes soft?

For starters, of course, a different kind of lead is required.

Indeed, the key difference between hard news and soft news is the approach taken in the lead.

Soft-news leads are often referred to as “feature leads” or “delayed leads.” These terms both give important clues about the fundamental problems faced by writers of soft-news leads.

First, soft-news leads are generally found atop “feature stories” — that is, stories that in the terminology of the trade are a little longer, more reflective, use more colourful language, or perhaps probe a little deeper. They are stories that, at least in theory, give more scope to a writer’s creativity.

In attempting to begin such a story — which may aim for the heart rather than the head — the writer ought not to hammer the reader with the most important facts. Indeed, with the approach typical of soft-news leads, the writer goes nowhere near the Five Ws in the opening of the story. Instead, she can take a little time to set the tone, paint the scene, introduce the reader to the atmosphere that surrounds the story — hence the notion of a delayed lead.

The writer of soft news is allowed to tease the reader at the start of the story, and to use a more traditional storytelling structure of beginning, build-up, climax and conclusion.

Thus the writer of a story about riding in a freight train locomotive through the Rocky Mountains, say, need not start with the most important facts — whatever they may be. (Maybe, The new General Electric AC4400 heavy haul locomotive can use its 4,500 horsepower diesel engine to haul...) Rather, she can write something like:

This ain’t the Orient Express, but it’s still murder!

With a soft-news lead like that, readers will get the point, and will more than likely stick around to get the story.

In theory, with soft news leads, almost anything goes. But with one important caveat: It must work! The scope given soft news writers gives us some of the best writing in the newspaper. Alas, this artistic license also gives us some of the worst.
Typically, however, most successful delayed leads have one thing in common: they move from the specific to the general.

So, for example, a feature story might start by describing Farmer John out standing in his field. The aim, of course, would be to illustrate why John’s outstanding in his field.

While writers of soft-news leads are permitted — expected even — to take longer to get to the point of the story, they need to remember that readers nevertheless want to get to the point fairly quickly. After all, their objective is the same as that of a writer of a hard-news lead: to hook the reader, and to reel him in!

In an era when tight leads and short stories are in fashion, a key piece of advice to novice news writers is to keep their soft news fairly hard. A delayed lead is fine, but not to the point the story becomes tedious.

Moreover, this delayed approach requires the placement of a “nut graph” — a paragraph that sums up the focus of the story — high in the story. The nut graph, which we will discuss in more detail in a subsequent chapter, should appear by the fourth or fifth paragraph of the story.

Writers should also remember that soft news, done properly, still requires plenty of hard facts. Soft or not, we are writing journalism, not poetry!

Finally, writers need to remember that because of the fashion of the day, their soft news stories — like hard news stories — will be short and may grow even shorter. In short, as it were, the scope for delay in a delayed lead is shrinking.

Now, as we noted above, the most common form of the delayed lead moves from the specific (an example) to the general (a principle). So, for example, on June 4, 2005, a Toronto Star reporter wrote:

*Most Palestinians think Khaled Kasab Mahameed has lost his mind. Two months ago, the Muslim lawyer from the biblical town of Nazareth took it upon himself to do what no Arab has ever before dared — he launched a museum dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust.*

A specific example of the action of one person is designed to illustrate the point, as the Star’s reporter put it a few lines later, that “as symbols go, Mahameed’s efforts have been hailed as a watershed moment in Israeli-Arab relations.”

In addition to moving from specific examples to general principles, most soft-news leads also tend to be anecdotal, or narrative, in nature. That is, they tell a story rather that set out a statement of important facts. Here’s an example of a storytelling lead, used atop a personality profile of an Ontario politician who attended the 1983 Conservative convention:
Claude Bennett is working the floor, pressing the flesh, touching elbows. He’s cool. All around him — pandemonium.

There are almost 10,000 souls crammed into the Ottawa Civic Centre Arena this hot spring night, come to watch the destruction of some political careers, the flowering of others. Everyone is here for the show: pinstriped lawyers from unprestigious firms, bulging and purple-faced but still hungry; lean, shrewd-eyed, sunburned farmers from Elk’s Knuckle, with their plump, honest, ladies’ auxiliary wives; unwholesomely svelte young men in silk suits, $60 haircuts and wraparound sunglasses; tight-faced college keeners shadowing jobs as executive assistants; incredibly beautifully women, clad in gowns as colourful and splendid as Joseph’s coat. …

Naturally, journalism professors (having no need to write to deadline), love to classify this stuff. Since there are plenty of things a writer can do with a soft-news lead that could never be contemplated in the hard news pages, there’s lots of scope for creating lists of categories of soft news leads.

Of course, there’s really no end to the number of great ideas — or lame ones — that can be used for leading soft news stories. Here are just a few:

**Teaser leads** try to tease the reader to tickle her fancy. Determined to live long and prosper, a drought-ridden Vulcan, Alta., started the 1990s with a bold move to put itself on the intergalactic map. And it worked … sort of. The writer hoped readers would stick with the story to find out that the Southern Alberta town had gone boldly where no other dust-blown Prairie town had gone before by bringing itself to the attention of North America’s legions of Star Trek fans.

**Ironic leads** try to use the humour in irony to grab readers’ attention. Here’s one from a how-to story, a common type of feature, which tried to teach readers how to tie a bowtie. It takes a real man to wear a bowtie. Any sissy can strap on a long tie or wear no tie at all. But try walking into a room full of grease monkeys in stained coveralls and asking directions to the foreman’s office — if you’re wearing a nice polka-dot bow-tie, they’ll know right off who’s boss!

**Question-mark leads** ask a question. They top most journalists’ leads-to-avoid list. Why? Because they usually ask questions readers don’t want answered. Still, done right, they can work. Is cowboy poetry keeping up with the times? Most of the more than 90 poets lariat who rode into Pincher Creek from across Western Canada and the United States this weekend for their seventh annual Canadian gathering say No. More to the point, they practically shout it: “NO!”

**List leads** reinforce evidence of a trend. General Motors boasts that it makes the most fuel-efficient large cars on the market. Toyota’s hybrid cars sell so well that buyers usually aren’t able to arrange a test drive. Mercedes is building a two-seater that gets more than 75 miles per gallon. Suddenly, good mileage is important again.
Great-quote leads build on a quote. Passenger Charlie Powell knew something was wrong when he heard the bang and felt the wing of the elderly Grumman Goose seaplane dip. “I thought, ‘We’re all gonna die!’ … And most of us did.”

Person-centred leads, like the one about the Nazareth lawyer above, try to use a story about an individual to illustrate a broader situation involving lots of people.

Contrast leads highlight an ironic contrast to make a point. The mild mannered office clerk who turns out to be a mass murderer and the millionaire pilot who squired around movie stars then and hides in a hotel room now are all fodder for this approach.

Play-on-word leads can be sublime, but they carry a high risk. After all, it’s said the pun is both the highest and lowest form of humour. A description of a boy and his grill might work on a summertime story about outdoor cookery. But if you’re thinking of linking petunia sales to the sweet smell of success, well, just forget it!

Situational leads describe a situation in hopes of illuminating a bigger point. Ralph Plotz is exhausted. His complexion is chalky, his five-o’clock shadow positively Nixonian, his smart blue suit rumpled, and his tummy, a victim of too many quick and greasy restaurant meals, creeping over his belt. Still, you can sense the little tremor of anticipation when Plotz — suddenly the “enfant terrible” of Western Canada’s small-c conservative scene — eases his squat frame up to the podium. But the risk is high that they can descend into untended hilarity. The old journalist sits at his desk, staring at his computer, without an idea in his head. As more than one observer has pointed out, if the most exciting thing someone can do is sit, it’s time for another subject!

Nightmare leads — It was a nightmare come to life… — and poetic leads are right up there on most folks’ Don’t-Do lists. Still, as in most creative matters, never say never. Done right, almost anything can work! Consider:

They'll be ridin’
From Vancouver,
Manitoba,
Dawson Creek.

Even one
From Lubbock, Texas,
Has set out
For Pincher Creek.

It's those drat-blamed
Cowboy poets,
81 of 'em
In all

Comin' for
Summary

- Soft news requires a different approach to lead writing.

- Soft-news leads are also often called *delayed leads* because they start by telling a story before getting to the key facts.

- Delayed leads require the use of a “nut graph” — which explains the thesis, or the main point, of the story.

- The nut graph should be placed high in the story so that the reader does not have to wait for long to find out what the story is about.

- Most successful delayed leads move from the specific to the general.

- Most soft-news leads tend to be *anecdotal, or narrative*, in nature — telling a story rather than setting out a statement of important facts.