

A large red square with a white border, centered on a white background. Inside the square, the text "Writing Leads & Conclusions" is written in white, bold, sans-serif font.

# Writing Leads & Conclusions

# What We'll Learn

THE LEAD'S JOB DESCRIPTION

WRITING THE LEAD

TYPES OF LEADS

EDITING THE LEAD

WRITING THE CONCLUSION

COMMON WAYS TO END AN ARTICLE

CHECK YOUR CONCLUSION

## Bio

Jeremy Weber is director of CT Global at Christianity Today, a media ministry which seeks to fulfill its founder Billy Graham's vision by building a "central nervous system for the global body of Christ."

Jeremy oversees all non-US and non-English content at CT, managing a multinational team of journalists producing news and opinion focused on evangelical/Protestant Christianity for a core audience of Christian thought leaders. CT's print magazine and website reach 4 million readers monthly, with 1/3 of readers outside the US. CT's multilingual initiative has produced 2,000+ non-EN articles across 10+ languages, reaching 4 million readers since March 2020.

An award-winning journalist based in Chicago, Jeremy has reported from Nigeria, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic, among other countries. He graduated from Wheaton College and has worked at CT for 15 years.



# The Lead

The lead and the conclusion are among the most important elements of an article. The lead is the reader's first impression of the article. It not only reveals what the article is about, it gives the reader an idea of the writer's skill.

If it isn't attractive, the reader may not read the rest of the article. A weak lead that doesn't attract readers can ruin an otherwise promising article. A strong lead that draws readers into the article ensures the author will be given a fair chance to engage the reader.

The conclusion is important because it is the last thought the reader leaves the article with. It is an opportunity to reinforce the main point or leave a strong impression.

# Your Lead Must Be Great

Why must your lead be great?

Not everyone is already interested in your topic. Perhaps your theme is something they should want to know about and would be interested in once they got into your article. It's the job of the lead to entice the reader into the article.

Also, people are busy. They may have carved out a few minutes to see if there is something they would like to read and they are leafing through the magazine or newsletter. The job of your lead is to stop them in their tracks and draw them into the article.

# Your Lead Must Be Great

Also, some people are not natural readers and find it hard work— especially if they are reading in a language that is not their mother tongue. If you are going to convince them to make the effort to read your article, your lead must be a hook to pull them in.

People have many distractions. They may not have the luxury of sitting down quietly with your magazine and giving careful attention to every article. You may have to fight for their attention.

# Your Lead's Job Description

Your lead has five main jobs. First, it should entertain. You may think, “This is an important topic. People should want to read it. Why should I entertain the reader?” However, even a serious article should start in an interesting way.

The lead establishes the subject of the article, telling the potential reader what it is about. The reader needs to know the topic of the article in order to know if it will interest him.

The lead must attract the attention of the prospective reader, making her stop and take a second look. The lead also involves the reader, changing him from someone whose attention was simply engaged to someone who is reading the article. The lead is a bridge, taking the reader into the article.

# Writing the Lead

How long should a lead be? One sentence? Two? A paragraph or two? There is no rule. Don't waste words, but don't unnecessarily abbreviate a lead because you think it should be only one or two sentences.

Don't spend too much time worrying over the lead. You can always come back to it. In fact, it isn't necessary to write the lead first. You may have gotten a great idea for a lead as you were doing research for the article. In that case, the lead is the place to begin. However, if you are struggling with the lead, skip it and go ahead with the rest of the article. An idea for the lead may come to you as you're writing.



# Writing the Lead

Be as concise as you can be, so that you can get into the article. Readers want to know what the article is about; if the lead is too long, you'll frustrate your readers. However, make it as long as it needs to be. There may be times when you need a little more space to give background or context.

Never start a magazine article by saying: "This article is about..." Your college teacher may tell you to start your assignment that way. That's fine, but don't bore your readers by telling them what you are about to tell them.

# Writing the Lead

Under most circumstances you should avoid starting an article with a Bible verse. Why not? What is more significant than the word of God?

The problem is that people are so familiar with Scripture that they will simply skip over the verse. A paragraph or two of Scripture delays getting the reader into the body of the article and doesn't answer the question: What is this article about?

The exception to the rule is when you use a very short and especially intriguing or dramatic quote from Scripture to illustrate the main premise of your article.

# Writing the Lead

Your lead should not be misleading. You want your lead to be interesting so that people will read your article. But, don't pretend in your lead that the article is about something more dramatic or enticing than the actual topic of the article.

Be sure you don't "bury" your lead. Read your article over after you've finished the first draft and ask yourself whether the lead you chose is the best one or whether there is something else that would make a better lead.

# Types of Leads

Some leads may be a combination of a couple of different types of leads, though they can usually be identified as one specific type.

The following are some types of leads you might want to try to write.

# Types of Leads: State the facts

This may be one of the easiest and least interesting leads to write, since it simply tells what the article is about. Or, this kind of lead may summarize the main point of the article. Nevertheless, there are times when this is the most practical lead for an article. Not every lead must be dramatic. However, there is no reason the summary lead can't be interesting if it is well written.

*From an article on “easy” Bible translations*

*Millions of Americans are frustrated in their attempts to understand the Bible. R.C. Sproul found 80 percent of evangelicals have never read the Bible all the way through. In a survey of 6,000 people, only 56 percent said they read the Bible on a somewhat regular basis.*

# Types of Leads: Repeat a quote

Use an intriguing quote that is well said or especially interesting or amazing, one that summarizes the problem situation, or one that previews what the article is going to be about.

*From an article on hell*

*“The idea of hell was born of revenge and brutality. I have no respect for any human being who believes in it...I dislike this doctrine, I hate it, I despise it, I defy this doctrine...” So said Colonel Robert Ingersoll, one of the 19th century’s most fervent opponents of Christ, Christianity, and hell.*

# Types of Leads: Ask a question

This kind of lead can be attractive and is relatively easy to write. Be sure, however, that the question is one the reader will want to know the answer to—or that the reader can identify with. Don't ask a question to which the answer is: "Who cares?" Be sure the question relates to the topic. Don't give in to the temptation to ask a provocative question simply to get the attention of the reader.

*Reason and faith—are they enemies or allies? Is the Christian faith reasonable, or is it simply a blind leap that is ultimately irrational?*

# Types of Leads: Relate an anecdote

Readers love stories and will be attracted to an article that begins with an interesting story. The anecdote should illustrate your main point and lead into the topic of your article. However, it should be a short story. Beware of letting the anecdote become so long and complicated that it takes over the article.

*Whenever Marian Wright Edelman gives a speech, she tells “the flea story.” It seems that in the 1800s, a well-known black woman preacher was speaking to a crowd when a white man shouted at her. “You’re nothing but a flea on a dog’s back,” he sneered. “That’s all right,” she said. “I’m going to keep you scratching.” Marian likes to think of herself, and those with whom she works at the Children’s Defense Fund in Washington, D.C., as “fleas of justice.” For 17 years they have kept legislators scratching to come up with better ways to care for our nation’s children—20 percent of whom live below the poverty line.*



# Types of Leads: Create an analogy

This is a comparison that illustrates your main point. It may be a short explanation of one thing well known to the reader to infer or refer to a less tangible concept you will describe in your article. It may be a simile, as in “this” (the point I will make in my article) is like “that” (something with which the reader is familiar and agrees).

*Imagine you are walking through a garden and you notice a butterfly struggling to leave its cocoon. What would happen if, in an effort to help it, you took some scissors and cut the cocoon away? In a few hours you would witness a tragedy. The wings, small and shriveled, would not fill out with all their potential beauty. Instead of developing into a creature free to fly, the butterfly would drag a broken body through its short life. The cocoon and the struggle necessary to be free from it are God’s way of forcing fluid into the butterfly’s wings. The “merciful” snip would have been, in reality, quite cruel. Similarly, in our efforts to help others grow spiritually, we may interfere with what God is doing in their lives.*

# Types of Leads: Make a surprising statement

The purpose is to attract the reader's attention and make her wonder what will happen next. The statement must relate to the main theme of the article. The reader will feel betrayed if the purpose of the statement is simply to get her attention.

*Every disabled person I knew, I disliked. The activist who chained his wheelchair to the bumper of a city bus without a ramp. The small group of wheelchair students at the university who complained at the smallest injustice. Not one had my sympathy. The odd thing was, I was in a wheelchair, too.*

# Types of Leads: Show a person affected by the problem

Your article may include statistics and important facts, but readers will relate to the topic and are more likely to continue reading if you can start off by talking about a person affected by the situation you will later describe in detail.

*Two women stood in the fellowship hall after our Sunday morning service. I guessed that they were newcomers, as I hadn't seen them before. While I visited with the same friends I always talked with, I watched the women out of the corner of my eye. Neither seemed comfortable. I really should go over and introduce myself, I thought. But I needed to see Connie about an announcement in the church newsletter. When I had taken care of that, my husband came over and said that we'd better get along. "OK," I said. "I'll meet you in the car, but first I want to say hello to... Oh, never mind—they're gone."*

# Types of Leads: Describe a scene

This lead can set the tone for your article and can be an interesting way of introducing your topic. Can you show a picture of the situation you are writing about? This will help draw your reader into the article. However, be sure to keep your description short.

*From an article on demonstrating our love for Jesus.*

*The room is filled with the pleasant smells of the banquet. Glowing lamps cast yellow images against the wall, and there is a murmur of quiet conversation. Suddenly the sound of breaking glass turns all heads. There, kneeling beside the honored guest, is a woman known to them all. Her trembling hands clutch an alabaster jar, broken at the top. From its rough opening she pours the contents onto the guest's head and then his feet. Glancing hurriedly around the room, the woman lets down her hair and with it wipes the fragrant liquid from his feet.*

# Types of Leads: Give multiple examples of a problem situation

Your article may describe a situation or a problem and offer possible solutions. Instead of just stating the main point of your article and going on, you will have more success drawing readers into the article if you give a few very short examples of the problem or situation you want to address.

*Take a minute to imagine how you might feel in the following situations: A woman shows up Sunday morning in a beautiful new dress. Friends buy a new house you couldn't afford. Another woman's husband surprises her with a romantic weekend away and you know your husband would never think of such a thing.*

*If any of these situations causes you to feel a slight bit of jealousy- you're not alone!*

# Types of Leads: Make a paradoxical or contrasting statement

Look at your article. Is there a possible paradox you can highlight in your lead? Or can you show a contrast to the theme of your article— perhaps a statistic that illustrates by contrast the importance of your premise.

*Christians everywhere sing the words he wrote—“O’ for a closer walk with God”—but few know that the author of those words suffered deep depressions and even periods of madness.*

# Types of Leads: Create suspense

This kind of lead makes the reader want to see what happens next. However, as with the surprising or interesting statement lead, you shouldn't deceive the reader by building fake suspense. Can you find a legitimate way to create some suspense centered around your topic?

*From an article on leadership, using King Saul's mistake as an example*

*I would have done exactly the same thing. I could almost feel myself shudder inside because I realized that my reaction could have been the same.*

# Types of Leads: News lead

This lead answers the important questions about the event—who, what, when, where, and sometimes how and why.

*Nearly 5,000 pastors, lay preachers, and other church workers came from across the 11 time zones of the Soviet Union to attend a Billy Graham School of Evangelism conducted last month in Moscow.*



# Types of Leads: Dialogue lead

This lead depicts a conversation between two or more individuals discussing a situation or illustrating a situation you will describe in your article. The dialogue should be short enough that the reader can understand what is being said and who is saying it.

*“Célestin?” Her mother’s voice sounds nervous. “Célestin, I need to tell you something—Georges is here again.” Célestin, who has just come home, turns sharply. “Georges, Mathieu’s brother? Here, in town?” “Yes, he got a job at court, as a junior lawyer.” “Oh, well...” She sees her mother’s worried look and pulls herself together. “Don’t be afraid, I’ll manage. Now, leave me alone, okay?” She disappears into her room.*

# Check Your Lead

How do you know if you have written an effective lead? Ask yourself these questions:

Does it arouse the reader's curiosity or show a benefit of reading the article?

Is the writing compelling?

Does it tell the reader what the article will be about?

Does it accurately reflect the tone of the article?

Does it provide a good bridge into the rest of the article?

# Editing the Lead

As an editor, you may be called upon to edit another writer's article. You will need to give special attention to the lead. You may need to tighten a wordy lead. New writers especially tend to include too much explanation. Help them get to the point.

If the lead is weak, look for a better lead within the article. Sometimes an anecdote or quote "buried" later in the article can be moved to the front for an effective lead. However, if the lead just isn't fixable ask the writer to rewrite—if you think he or she can do better. Be sure to suggest several different ways the writer could start the article.

But, if there's no time to go back to the author or if you don't think he or she can write a good lead you may have to rewrite the lead yourself.

# Writing the Conclusion

The conclusion is your last opportunity to get your message across and to make an impact on your reader. For this reason, it is one of the most important elements of the article.

Why not just stop when you run out of things to say? Is there a main point you want your readers to take away with them? Get that into your conclusion.

Not every article lends itself to a “punchline” at the end. But, don’t give the reader the impression you wrote and wrote and then at some point you fell asleep and stopped writing.

# Common Ways to End an Article

There is no one right way to conclude an article. Most articles lend themselves to at least two or three different treatments.

Here are some typical types of conclusions.

# Types of Conclusions: Summarize your message

This type of conclusion is especially useful if you've made several related points and you want to bring it all together so that the reader has the main take-away—the idea or conclusion you want the reader to gather from all that you've said in the article.

*My fears often try to take control and stop me from sharing. But as I learn to lean on God and act in spite of my fears, I'm finding that it does become easier. And now I'm experiencing the special joy of telling others that Jesus loves them.*

# Types of Conclusions: Restate your main points

You may simply tell your readers in brief what you want them to remember and take away from your article. Don't simply repeat what you've said in the article. Try to say it in a fresh way.

*So what can we learn? First, when we truly love Christ we will be compelled to demonstrate that love. Second, when we choose to do so we can expect criticism from others. Finally, when our hearts and motives are pure, the Lord sees what we do and accepts it. Let love and obedience—not pride and conformity—determine your actions. And let him deal with the critics.*

# Types of Conclusions: Project the future

This type of conclusion summarizes the main points and suggests what might happen next. Or, you may suggest what could happen if the reader does what the you are saying he should do. However, be careful not to make promises that might not come true.

*As you begin to see ministry to those around you as an important purpose in your life, and to plan and pray accordingly, you will be a true missionary—without quitting your job and moving halfway around the world. Like missionaries overseas, you can experience the joy of seeing God use your life to bring friends, neighbors, and co-workers to himself.*



# Types of Conclusions: Challenge the reader to act

You might conclude your article by challenging the reader to take your topic seriously and act on the basis of your premise.

*The fiery grace that ignited these believers' hearts has been offered to us as well. Will we kindle our own hearts in its flame—so that our lives, too, will blaze with a passion for God?*

# Types of Conclusions: Show how to take action

If your article is describing a situation that should change, your conclusion could simply give short examples of ways the reader might apply what he has learned.

*If you feel God tugging at your heart, challenging you to minister to the needy world beyond your church's walls, consider the following steps: Pray about becoming involved in an outreach. Find out about the needs of your town or city. Discover what is already being done through your church or community organizations, and then decide how much time per week or month you can serve. Ministry within the church is important, but I challenge you to take a risk. Step out of your comfort zone and discover the excitement of serving God in a creative new way.*

# Types of Conclusions: Reinforce your point with a quote

Sometimes a pithy or especially interesting comment from someone famous (or even a Bible character) can be a memorable way to sum up the main point of your article or reinforce your argument.

*From a profile:*

*“We can get so bogged down in our own needs and wanting to be big dogs,” she says. “But God uses little people and little things. The jawbone. The slingshot. I believe we just need to lay our little loaves and fishes out there and leave the rest to faith. Let those little loaves and fishes feed however many as they can.”*

# Types of Conclusions: Give evidence that it works

Here's your last opportunity to offer proof that your suggestions actually work. You might use a short anecdote showing how your ideas work.

*I felt good about our approach the other night when Jeremie reacted to a TV scene. "Raymond shouldn't kiss a girl like that unless he really likes her," he said. Even at eight, he's learning that what society calls love may be something quite different.*

# Types of Conclusions: Echo the lead

You may refer back to a story or analogy you used in the lead. This kind of lead works best in short articles, where the reader is likely to remember the lead.

*Lead: I stared at my piece of paper in disbelief. After months of anticipation, I had finally received my secret Indian name from the visiting spiritual master. “He gave me a man’s name,” I complained. “I thought he knew everything. How could he make a mistake like that?”*

*Conclusion: As a follower of Jesus, I know that my name is written in his “book of life” (Rev. 21:27). God is no longer a distant stranger. Through Jesus, he is my loving Father and he knows me by name.*

# Types of Conclusions: Split anecdote conclusion

If you began the article by telling a story, you may want to end it by telling the rest of the story. You might use this where you start out the article with a story introducing a problem you will solve in the article. In the conclusion you finish the story showing how the steps you took to solve the issue really did work. This kind of conclusion can give a memorable finish to the article.

# Split anecdote conclusion:

*Lead: It was a bitter January evening in 1992 when the phone rang and my 15-year-old son, Tajin, hollered, “Mom, it’s for you!”*

*“Who is it?” I asked. I was tired. It had been a long day. There seemed to be a cloud of despair hanging over my heart.*

*“It’s Bob Thompson,” Tajin answered.*

*[Body of article... followed by:]*

*Conclusion: I took the phone from my son’s hand and immediately my hand went clammy. I know why he’s calling. He’s calling to tell me to stop bothering his wife. They probably think I’m a religious kook.*

*[Description of conversation.]*

*As Bob Thompson continued to share his wife’s story with me, the drab landscape of my own life was transformed. As insignificant as my life appeared to be to me, God used it to shine his love upon another life, resulting in a gift that no one could take away.*

# Types of Conclusions: Combination conclusion

This conclusion combines a couple of types of conclusions into one.

*I'll never forget the day I decided to weed the garden. The peppers had just started growing. I wasn't very far down the row when Sharol raced from the house to find me pulling up as many peppers as weeds. You see, seedlings all look alike to me. I wanted a neat garden, but I wasn't carefully valuing each pepper plant. In my eagerness to get rid of weeds, I nearly destroyed our garden. We are not called to judge whether one person will grow more than another as a result of our investment in them. The issue is rather how we should invest in each one God has given us. As Peter reminds us, lead eagerly and gently. Adopt a style that guards, teaches, empowers and trusts, rather than scolding, blaming, controlling or manipulating. And remember, your sheep are really God's: As you know them, nourish them and value them, you'll be a partner with God in building them and watching them grow.*



# Types of Conclusions: Make your last point and quit

This is how a news article normally ends, and for a news article that is fine. Newspaper readers expect the most important information to be in the lead and the following few paragraphs, with less important information in the last paragraphs.

# Check Your Conclusion

It isn't important for you to be able to identify every type of conclusion. However, when you are ready to write your conclusion, consider the various ways you might try for a strong conclusion.

Most articles will lend themselves to a variety of conclusions. Don't stay with the first type that occurs to you. It will probably be the type you consistently use.

Instead, try for a punchline, leaving the reader with a strong impression. Make your conclusion meaningful and important, rather than simply drifting off at the end.

# Check Your Conclusion

Don't introduce a new thought in the conclusion. If you bring in a new thought or subject at the end you leave a question in the reader's mind. So instead of leaving the reader with a clear thought or idea, there is a sense of doubt or confusion.

Don't conclude by saying, "In conclusion..." Preachers may say it as they are coming to the end of their sermons in order to encourage their hearers that release is on the way. But, it's unnecessary for writers to say it. Your reader can see the article is ending.

What you want to do is make your ending powerful and strong. After all, it's your last opportunity to fix your message in your readers' hearts and minds.

# Be Creative

You have an opportunity to make your article more appealing and significant simply by thinking creatively as you consider how to write the two most important parts of your article—the lead and conclusion.

It's easy to fall into the habit of writing one or two types of leads and conclusions. Stop and consider if there might be a better way of introducing your article and leaving a strong impression at the end.

After all, you spend a lot of time researching and writing. You want the article to be read and remembered. Consider trying something new. Your readers will appreciate a fresh approach.

# Group Exercise

## Leads & Conclusions

1. Look at an article you or someone else has written and consider one or two alternate ways the lead could have been written. You will need to read the whole article. If you have time, go ahead and rewrite the lead.

Or, take an article you are currently writing. Could you write a more appealing lead? Try writing a type you've never before written.

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# Group Exercise

## Leads & Conclusions

2. Look at the conclusion of the same article. Think of one or two variations that could have made the ending more significant. If you have time, go ahead and write one of those endings.

Are you currently writing an article? Consider trying a new type of ending.

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