

Nail the Lead if You Want to Nail the Story

By Larry LaRue

Whenever I talk about writing, I try to warn newcomers to the craft – ‘Listen, I’m a professional. Don’t try this at home.’

Among my published work are stories about singing dogs, a freedom-loving hippopotamus, and a revealing piece on a nude beach that required me to wear nothing but a press card.

After nearly 40 years of writing, I’ll put my list of idiotic news assignments up against anyone.

Always, I began at the beginning - The Lead.

If you can’t be grabby in the first paragraph, readers move on. Write tight, hook ‘em, drag ‘em in.

That philosophy holds in poetry, fiction and the odd news piece that was always being flung my way by almost every editor I ever worked for. There are hundreds of news stories I cannot recall writing.

I remember every lead.

What most people dream about, Roger Kistner found.

In small, unmarked bills. In his front yard.

All told, it came to just more than \$2,300.

Now I ask you, is that greatness or what?

Mr. Kistner found the bag of cash, called police and returned it. Not much of a story. Not nearly as good as that lead.

How about profiles? Assigned to write about a mailman retiring after 34 years on the same route, I got my lead before the man opened his front door – inspired by what was on his porch.

On the stoop outside his door sit a pair of worn black shoes. Red Meairs should throw them out but can’t bring himself to do so.

They’re comfortable – and when you’ve spent 34 years walking a route for the U.S. Postal Service, comfortable shoes become friends.

When a man was gunned down before he could testify against fellow criminals, it was a complex story but had the simplest of hooks.

Early on the morning of Oct. 22, two mistakes and nine bullets killed Stephen John Bovan.

He told friends he was hiding from the mob, that someone wanted to kill him. Shortly after 3:30 a.m., someone did.

All of us wrestle with our work, and some writers can't get started without a solid first paragraph. It can be punchy, touching, dramatic – but it has to produce curiosity in the reader.

When men started being murdered on Los Angeles' skid row, there were a dozen ways to write about it. I started with one victim and what had been found on his body.

The estate of J.B. Henderson was one dime and a hamburger sandwich.

When a new police chief's first year in office lowered crime stats, the story wasn't exciting. Comparing it to other cities in the county at least produced a lead.

There used to be a joke about crime in Orange County. No matter how bad it got – anywhere – it was always worse in Stanton. And it was. Until now.

Back in '79, a San Diego 16-year-old who lived with her father across the street from an elementary school loaded a .22 rifle and began firing out a window.

She shot children and killed a school janitor who tried to save them, a principal who ran to his aid. It went on for more than two hours before the shooter surrendered.

She stood an even five-feet and had freckles.

I spent a full day in San Diego, talking to parents, school teachers, kids and cops. My lead:

*The first shot was a dull pop.
Greg Vernon, a six-year-old in a bright yellow parka, dropped to the sidewalk.*

Assigned a profile of a charmingly eccentric attorney, I was regaled with stories of his legal career.

William Sheffield's greatest hits include his lawsuit against the pope, his lawsuit against the President of the United States and his defense in court of a hippopotamus.

Early in my career, when I was full of self importance, I was assigned to cover a circus parade – well beneath what I considered my station. So I went and while awaiting the first elephant or clown, I watched a young boy eagerly watching the street.

I wrote this lead, sent it to desk and waited snarkily for it to be returned. It wasn't. Almost 40 years later, I still cannot believe it actually appeared on the pages of the Omaha World Herald:

"The circus will draw on the impatience of youth as surely as a mongoose will suck a duck egg.

"Proof of that old parable lives in Jeff Tierney, age 3."

I got to watch a city editor walk into the office the next morning, open his paper, get to that story and spit his coffee out. I consider that alone worth the foolishness.

A love of The Lead carried over for me into everything I ever wrote, whether it was for a newspaper, a magazine or an unpublished novel.

For the latter, I went with what I knew.

"Michael Leavy sat at the bar, drinking to the 27 women and five newspapers that each owned a piece of his heart. The women would have nothing to do with him. The newspapers would not leave him alone."

Now, I ask you, don't you want to read more? If so, I just happen to have a copy in my desk drawer here ...

Larry LaRue is a sports writer with the Tacoma News Tribune covering the Seattle Mariners. You can read his reportage and commentary on at <http://www.thenewstribune.com/sports/mariners/> and you can follow him and see his photography on Facebook at [facebook.com/kwlarue](https://www.facebook.com/kwlarue), Twitter at [@LarryLaRue](https://twitter.com/LarryLaRue) and the News Tribune Mariners' blog at <http://blog.thenewstribune.com/mariners/> His book, Major League Encounters, is due out later this year.

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