

CLICHÉ LEADS – AVOID LIKE THE PLAQUE

(What is a cliché? If you've heard it before, it's cliché!)

By Dick Thien (SPJ) Society of Professional Journalists and ACES (American Copy Editors Society).

Avoid these leads like the plague..... until the last dog dies (unless you area reporter on a middle school newspaper).....

Avoid journalese and the cliché lead -- **the easy lead that you've read a thousand times**. The cliché lead does not necessarily employ a cliché. It is an **overworked formula that produces groans from journalists all over**. Here are a few examples:

The 'He leaned back in his chair/tree/whatever' lead *(edited from Thien's example)*

After a while, in a startling and unexpected development, the deeply sorrowful (insert name), 33, son of (insert name), leaned back against an olive tree, stretched out his 5-foot, 10-inch frame, put his head in his hands as tears slowly rolled down his cheeks -- "quite a few tears" informed sources, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said -- as his very close associates looked on.

The question lead

Ever wonder what happened to Tom Mix?

Most people don't. The famous movie cowboy of yesterday is not a familiar name among today's movie-goers. But ask a teenager about George Clooney, and you'll get a complete biography.

The Webster's Dictionary lead

Webster's defines cliché as a trite phrase or expression. If that's true, then this lead is a cliché, and . . .

The that's good, that's bad news lead

The good news is that on-line classes have begun.

The bad news is that most students don't have computers.

The unrelated Zimmerman lead

Adolf Munch reached into his rear pants pocket and pulled out his worn brown leather wallet. He fumbled through the small denomination bills, crumpled grocery lists, credit cards and old photographs before pulling out a shiny, new card with his picture on the front.

Munch is one of many who have opted for the new credit cards with a photo identification on them.

The 'that's what' lead

Some leads are easier to write than others.

That's what 15 reporters participating in a Poynter Institute online seminar said Monday.

The 'What's My Line' lead

It's new. It's state of the art. It's easy to use, and even easier tounderstand. It's the Poynter Institute's online classroom.

The 'thanks-to' lead

Thanks to Bud Pagel, the journalism college teaches story-telling rather than dumping the notebook.

The holiday lead

Sunday was Valentines Day, but you would not know it by the way taxi drivers were treating their riders.

The go-look-it-up lead

When Dick Thien was born in 1939 in St. Louis, Franklin D. Roosevelt was president and newspapers cost less than a nickel.

The one-word lead (Variation of 'that's what')

Cynical.

That's what most people think journalists are.

The word lead (Variation of the one-word lead)

Flabbergasted was the only word that Jack Hart could think of when all the reporters got their orientation exercises done on time.

The 'typical' lead

At first glance, the Associated Press Managing Editors seems to be just another typical news organization.

It's that and more, John Quinn says.

The 'in common' question lead

What do Charlie Chaplin and Bill Clinton have in common?

The Rodney Dangerfield lead

Garbage collectors get no respect.

Lawyers get no respect.

But coach Frank Solich says his Cornhuskers are going to get respect.

The time-is-important lead

Today, Feb. 15, is the first day of online instruction for journalists across the country.

The I-fooled-you lead

Sex, drugs and booze.

That's not what you'll find in newsrooms today, Kent Clark, managing editor of the Gotham Daily Planet, said.

The 'many' lead

Many journalists don't know they exist, but online courses in newspapering are being offered by the Poynter Institute.

The 'exceptional' lead

Most journalists have trouble writing a snappy lead, and Edgar Poe is no exception.

The 'now-look-at' lead

When your parents bought their first home, mortgage interest rates were only 2 percent. Now look at what they are.

The quote lead

"It was a wonderful contest, and I'm glad my pie won," Jessica Pillsbury said upon getting her blue ribbon Saturday at the Whoopee County Fair.

The 'adding to the intrigue/mystery' lead

Adding to the intrigue of when the journalism college will move into its new building is when the number of students will justify the space.

A person or situation can be intriguing (i.e. fascinating). But you stretch the definition beyond repair, and get into the misty world of duplicity and romance, when you fall back on this cliché lead. An intrigue is a scheme or love affair. The same logic applies if mystery replaces intrigue.

The King James English lead

The faxman will certainly cometh to readers, and grammatical error may cometh to the lazy reporter who uses this tired cliché lead more than once every 10 years.

(The suffix -eth is used only with third-person singular, present-tense verbs -- not with plurals, not with first or second persons, not with future tenses. In addition to being wrong on the grammar, such writers are mistaken in imagining that this stale device looks clever.)

The 'not alone' lead

George Tuck likes black and white photography. Tuck is not alone.

(Writing an anecdotal lead requires an eventual transition into the body of the story. That transition is the weak joint, the point at which writers are liable to sacrifice the reader's interest. They have often sacrificed that interest with the not alone transition: If they can't do better than that, they ought to skip anecdotal leads.)

The 'Welcome to' lead

Computer keyboards are clicking away, telephones are ringing and people are shouting across the room to one another.

Welcome to the Daily Nebraskan, the student newspaper at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln.

(The "Welcome to" gimmick is another lame transition from the anecdotal lead to the body of the story after some description of some woeful situation. This device should always be unwelcome.)

The 'Meet John/Jane Doe' lead

Few have professional experience.

Many have Ph.D.s.

Too many have little regard for the media, but love to talk about the "mass media," whatever that is.

Most haven't been inside a newspaper newsroom, or radio or television station in more than a decade.

Meet the journalism college faculty at almost any major college journalism program in the United States.

You have permission to reuse this material as long as you credit Dick Thien and ACES.