

Don't Bury the Lead

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[\(Back to Page 1\)](#)

The most commonly given sage advice in journalism is “*Don't bury the lead.*” It is excellent advice for those involved in the planning, development, and writing of grants as well. In journalism, the meaning of this phrase is simple: ***put the most important facts first in your story.*** The most important fact in a newspaper article is the lead. In an abbreviated form, the lead may serve as the headline for the story as well, making it a more compelling read, much like Vincent A. Musetto's immortalized headline in the *New York Post* of April 15, 1983: “*Headless Body in Topless Bar,*” a story about another horrific crime in New York City at a time, unlike today, when crime there was rampant.

In journalism, the lead answers the ***key generic questions of “who, what, where, when, why and how.”*** It is followed by other details important to the story, and finally concludes with general information or background, sometimes referred to as a “kicker.” In journalism, this narrative structure is called the “***inverted pyramid.***” The inverted pyramid serves as a journalistic template, much like the solicitation functions as the grant writer's narrative template, designed to prioritize information and provide an organizational structure to the news story, or, in grant writing, to organize the research narrative.

The inverted pyramid structure plays another important role as well, in a way particularly relevant to grant writing, in that the ***reader gets all the important information in the first paragraph,*** and all subsequent paragraphs further elaborate upon the lead paragraph with additional detail and specifics. Again, excellent advice to the grant writer. In this case, to “***bury the lead***” means to begin a news story with general background information without a “***compelling hook***” to induce the reader to read further in the story. This the reader is left to skim down through subsequent paragraphs to find the point of the story.

Of course, a few morning newspaper readers, perhaps powered by caffeine, may be willing to indulge the writer and patiently wait to get to the point of the story after a few paragraphs. But ***reviewers of a 15- to 40-page research proposal definitely will not be so indulgent of a buried lead.*** Too often, however, authors of a proposal's research narrative invert the journalist's inverted pyramid, orienting it “right side up,” forcing the reviewer to first read lengthy general background information that does nothing to make quickly clear to the reviewers what the proposer actually proposes to do and why it is important and deserving of funding.

Journalists write mostly about what ***others have already done in the past,*** or perhaps speculate, albeit with little certainty, about what others might possibly do in the future. The authors of a research narrative, however, must write about ***what they will do of importance in the future*** with convincing certainty supported by specificity and detail, often given credibility by what they have done in the past, i.e., preliminary data. Journalists write about the past; grant writers write about the future. Moreover, the lead of every story written by a journalist is unique. For the grant writer, the lead is always the same in every proposal: ***the significance of the goals and objectives of the proposed research.***

Research Development & Grant Writing News

Finally, like journalists, grant writers tell a story, too, and it must be a compelling one stated clearly if you are to have any chance of funding. Grant writers also have their own very similar version of the journalist's ***key generic questions of "who, what, where, when, why and how" that must be answered in the lead paragraph to "hook the reader," i.e., "what research do you propose to do, why do you propose to do it, why is it significant to the field or agency mission, why are you the person to do it, how will you do it, what is your research rationale, do you have preliminary results or results from prior support that help validate your capacity to perform?"***

So, don't bury the lead, or your proposal may end up buried in the declined for funding pile.