Checklist for Writing Print Leads

1. Is your lead specific rather than vague and abstract?

2. Have you avoided stating the obvious?

3. Have you emphasized your story’s most unusual or unexpected developments?

4. Have you emphasized your story’s most interesting and important developments?

5. Have you emphasized your story’s magnitude—and its impact upon its participants and readers?

6. Have you used a complete sentence, the proper tense and all the necessary articles (“a,” “an” and “the”)?

7. Is your lead concise? (If the sentence exceeds 30 words, examine the lead critically to determine whether it is wordy or repetitious or contains some unnecessary details.)

8. Have you avoided writing a label lead that reports your story’s topic but not what was said or done about it?

9. Did you begin your lead with the news—the main point of the story? (If you began with attribution or the time and place your story occurred, rewrite it.)

10. Have you used a relatively simple sentence structure, exercising particular care to avoid beginning the lead with a long phrase or clause?

11. Have you used strong, active and descriptive verbs rather than passive verbs such as “is,” “was” and “were”?

12. Is every name that appears in the lead essential? (Avoid unfamiliar names—and names that require lengthy identification that could be reported in a later paragraph.)

13. If a lead contains a quotation or a statement of opinion, is it properly attributed?

14. Has the lead been localized, and does it emphasize the latest developments, preferably what happened today or yesterday?

15. Have you eliminated statements of opinion, including one-word labels, such as “interesting” and “exciting”?

16. If you have used two sentences, can you justify their use? Are they concise and non-repetitive?
17. Have you read the lead aloud to be certain that it is clear, concise and easy to understand?

—Adapted from Reporting for the Print Media by Fred Fedler