

Inverted pyramid story format

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Just as they use many different kinds of leads, journalists use many different kinds of frameworks for organizing stories. Journalists may tell some stories chronologically. Other stories may read like a good suspense novel that culminates with the revelation of some dramatic piece of information at the end. Still other stories will start in the present, then flash back to the past to fill in details important to a fuller understanding of the story. All are good approaches under particular circumstances. As with writing leads, though, one should learn the basics before attempting fancier things. By far the simplest and most common story structure is one called the "inverted pyramid."

To understand what the "inverted pyramid" name means, picture an upside-down triangle -- one with the narrow tip pointing downward and the broad base pointing upward. The broad base represents the most newsworthy information in the news story, and the narrow tip represents the least newsworthy information in the news story. When you write a story in inverted pyramid format, you put the most newsworthy information at the beginning of the story and the least newsworthy information at the end. How do you decide which is which? You use the [news values](#).

An illustration might help. Imagine you must write an inverted pyramid news story from the following basic facts:

An accident occurred. It happened yesterday. Today is Tuesday. The accident was a car accident. It happened in Murfreesboro where Main Street and Broad Street intersect. One person was killed. The person was John Frazier. He was 20 years old and lived in Murfreesboro at 212 Moore Court. He was driving a blue 1998 Ford Mustang. He was driving northwest on Broad Street at about 5 p.m. He lost control of the car. It was raining, and the road was slick. He was also driving about 20 mph over the speed limit. He was the only one in the car. The car smashed into a utility pole along Broad Street. The impact crushed the whole front of the car. Frazier was thrown through the car's windshield. He landed on the pavement some 20 feet away. He wasn't wearing a seat belt. He was killed instantly.

To write an inverted-pyramid story from the facts, you first would write a lead that summarizes the most important information. Here's one possibility:

A Murfreesboro man died Monday afternoon when his car spun out of control on rain-slickened Broad Street, crashed into a utility pole and threw him through the windshield.

Like all good [straight news leads](#), this one summarizes the "what," "where," "when," "who," "why," and "how" of the story. The next graf of the story should pick up on some element of the lead and elaborate on it. In this example, the next graf gives more information about the victim:

The man, 20-year-old John Frazier of 212 Moore Court, lost control of his blue 1998 Ford Mustang around 5 p.m. while heading northwest on Broad Street at about 20 mph over the speed limit.

The next graf presents more details about the crash:

Skidding on the wet pavement, the car struck a utility pole along Broad Street. The impact threw Frazier through the windshield and onto the pavement some 20 feet away.

The story's final graf wraps up the remaining details:

Frazier, who was not wearing his seat belt at the time of the crash, died instantly. The pole crushed the front of the Mustang.

As you can see, the story would still contain all the essential information if an editor had to chop off the final graf. If an editor cut the next-to-last graf as well, the story would lose important information. But people would still know the name of the victim and a few details about how he died. Get the idea?

Note also how each graf has a logical connection to the preceding graf. The second graf, for example, is linked to the lead by the words, "the man." The words "the car" do the trick in the next graf, and "Frazier" is the link in the final graf. These links are called "[transition](#)," and they're essential to keeping the "flow" of the story smooth and logical.

Also note that each graf is very short, usually only one or two sentences long. Your English instructors rightly hammer into your head that paragraphs in an essay should be long. In news writing, though, grafes are kept short. Short grafes add punchiness. They also look better when typeset into a long, skinny column in a newspaper.

Why write this way? Well, for one thing, it's pretty logical. Imagine you're telling your best friend that you have just met the love of your life. Chances are you wouldn't start out with boring details like, "I got up at 8 a.m., I showered and got dressed, ate breakfast, brushed my teeth, went to class," then, finally getting to the juicy part, add, "and on the way bumped into this wonderful person I want to spend the rest of my life with." Nope. You'd be all excited, and the first thing you would blurt out to your friend would be, "I've just met the love of my life!" That would be the "lead" of your story. You'd then describe the next most important information: things like what this person is like, why you're nuts about this person, what this person looks like, and so forth. Finally, you'd get around to describing all the little details like exactly what you said and exactly what he or she said, and so forth.

There's a practical reason for the inverted pyramid format, too. Editors editing news stories often have to make the story a particular length so that it will fit into a predetermined amount of space in the newspaper. Furthermore, they often have to do so under severe deadline pressure. Speed is highly important. If a story is written in inverted pyramid format, the editor can simply trim the story one paragraph at a time, going from the bottom up, until the story is the right length. The editor can do so confidently, knowing that even though information is being cut from the story, it is being cut in ascending order of importance.

Once you get the hang of the inverted pyramid format, you'll find it has all kinds of uses. It comes in handy for writing letters, memos, short essays -- any kind of writing that involves having to make a point or tell a story quickly and clearly. Journalists use it, but it's not just for journalists.