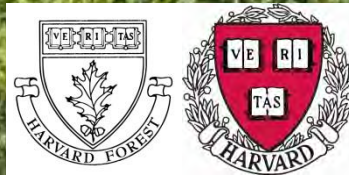


Telling Ecology's Stories: Writing

Clarisse Hart

Harvard Forest, Harvard University





There are 100 ways into every story



SETTING



PLOT (conflict/resolution)



CHARACTERS



Place Is Powerful

A hemlock grove is so shady that it's really only other hemlocks that can thrive in the understory. The rich greens and browns of hemlocks of all sizes stretch as far as you can see, punctuated by the occasional broad leaves and flowers of mountain laurel and hobblebush. Vibrant orange newts scramble around in the moist soil, navigating tiny thickets of wintergreen and brilliant red partridgeberry.

Throughout the year, layers upon layers of hemlock branches intercept moisture and sound from the air, making everything calm, quiet, and green.

The nearest thing to civilization around that particular hemlock site is a cloistered monastery. My hemlocks are at least a mile beyond those walls. You'd be hard pressed to find a quieter forest. The thick hemlock trunks—some that you need two sets of arms to get around—and their low-sweeping boughs absorbed all sound, except the huff of my own breath as I lugged field equipment up the steep slopes.

Over time, the thick boughs and the damp air of the hemlock forest settled around me like a protective shawl. I draped it over my shoulders and carried it with me out of the woods.

Activity:

Write Your Way into a Field Site

- Use all 5 of your senses. How does it smell? taste? feel? sound?
- Are you walking, sitting, wading? What are you carrying?
- How is the place different in different seasons, or different weather?
- Is human influence visible here?
- Do you remember the first time you came here?
- What would a local say about this place? What would a visitor wonder?



Plot: Make It Relevant

JOURNAL
OF
THE ROYAL
SOCIETY

Interface

Dangerous jellyfish blooms are predictable

Lisa-ann Gershwin, Scott A. Condie, Jim V. Mansbridge and Anthony J. Richardson

Published: 14 May 2014 | doi: 10.1098/rsif.2013.1168

The potentially fatal Irukandji syndrome is relatively common in tropical waters throughout the world. It is caused by the sting of the Irukandji jellyfish, a family of box jellyfish that are almost impossible to detect in the water owing to their small size and transparency.

Using collated medical records of stings and local weather conditions, we show that the presence of Irukandji blooms in coastal waters can be forecast on the basis of wind conditions.

On the Great Barrier Reef, blooms largely coincide with relaxation of the prevailing southeasterly trade winds, with average conditions corresponding to near zero alongshore wind on the day prior to the sting. These conditions are consistent with hypotheses long held by local communities and provide a basis for designing management interventions that have the potential to eliminate the majority of stings.



“A small team of researchers working in Australia has found a link between trade winds that blow near the Great Barrier Reef and jellyfish blooms that **impact swimmers along the coast**. In their paper published in *Journal of the Royal Society: Interface*, the researchers describe how they studied weather patterns over a 27 year period and compared what they found with reported jellyfish stings and **found a pattern that may help prevent jellyfish stings in the future.**”



Plot: Make It Relevant

“Every time you go outdoors in New England, you’re surrounded by at least a dozen species of ants. Some are pavement or picnic specialists; others live under rocks, inside acorn caps, or in the branches of trees.”

Harvard Forest press release

*Even if it is not about people,
it is about people.*

Rob Dunn



Do Your Homework

“Irukandji are almost impossible to detect in water because they are not only tiny but also transparent. But these jellyfish can have a dangerous, and potentially fatal, sting leaving some patients in need of life support after an encounter. Each year 50-100 hospitalisations due to irukandji are reported in Australia.”

Royal Society press release



Do Your Homework

Press Release

Greenland's fastest glacier reaches record speeds



SETTING



PLOT (conflict/resolution)



CHARACTERS



Build Your Characters



MARINE STINGERS
ARE PRESENT
IN THESE WATERS
DURING THE
SUMMER MONTHS



+ **VINEGAR**
For use on MARINE STINGS
POUR ON - DO NOT RUB

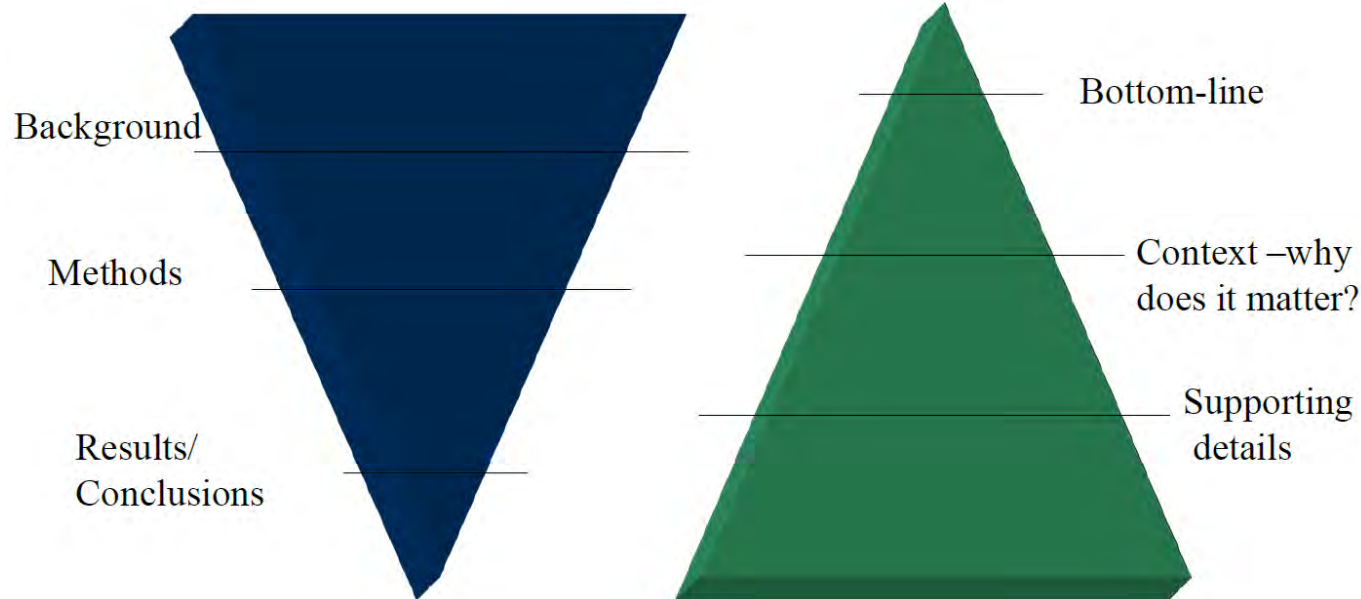
HERO/VILLAIN

SPOKESPEOPLE



You've Got 30 Seconds...

LEDE is writer-speak for the introduction to a piece of writing: your leading sentence(s).



Writing a Good Lede: Examples

IRONIC or CONTRAST LEDE:

The thing about the mud hoisted from the bottom of the Black Sea in the summer of 2001 – the thing that surprised and delighted the researchers aboard the *Professor Logachev* – was that there was hardly any mud at all.

– Robert Kunzig, from “20,000 Microbes Under the Sea”
in *Discover Magazine*

Writing a Good Lede: Examples

STRAIGHT SUMMARY LEDE:

One of the primary results – and one of the primary needs – of industrialism is the separation of people and products from their histories.

–Wendell Berry, from “Back to the Land”
in *The Amicus Journal*

Writing a Good Lede: Examples

PUNCH LEDE:

Life is short, but jingles are forever.

–Natalie Angier, from “Men, Women, Sex, and Darwin” in *The New York Times Magazine*

Writing a Good Lede: Examples

SNAPSHOT LEDE:

Somewhere deep in Botswana's Okavango Delta, a million miles from nowhere, a dog named Nomad leads his pack on a wild chase through the bush.

–Richard Coniff, from “Africa’s Wild Dogs”
in *National Geographic*

Writing a Good Lede: Activity

(NOW, YOU TRY)

Everyone is ganging up on biofuel.

– Reed McManus, from “Biofuel Takes a Beating”
in *Sierra Magazine*

STRAIGHT SUMMARY – SNAPSHOT – PUNCH – IRONIC/CONTRAST

Writing a Good Lede: Activity

High among the Virunga volcanoes, along the eastern edge of the Democratic Republic of Congo, there lives a group of gorillas with little interest in international politics. Day by day and week by week they wander through meadows of bracken fern, eating bamboo and nettles, mating in polygynous groups, and fastidiously grooming one another.

–Craig B. Stanford, from “Gorilla Warfare”
in *The Sciences*

Writing a Good Lede: Activity

This story about good food begins in a quick-stop convenience market.

- Barbara Kingsolver, from the chapter 1 opener of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*

Writing a Good Lede: Activity

The smallpox virus first became entangled with the human species somewhere between 3,000 and 12,000 years ago—possibly in Egypt at the time of the pharaohs.

– Richard Preston, from “The Demon in the Freezer”
in *The New Yorker*

Writing a Good Lede: Activity

Consider the hummingbird for a long moment. A hummingbird's heart beats ten times a second. A hummingbird's heart is the size of a pencil eraser. A hummingbird's heart is a lot of the hummingbird.

– Brian Doyle, from “Joyas Volardores”
in *The American Scholar*

Media Messaging

Activity





- Read your scientific paper (focus on abstract).
- Pick 3 main story points you'd include in a blog post.
- Draft a headline and lede.
- Who are your characters?
- What jargon will be important to avoid/define?
- Name 2 pieces of media (photos, videos, diagrams) to accompany the text.


Media Messaging

Reporting Back

- Watch the evolution from scientific paper title to press release to headline.
- How do the ledes compare?
- What story points were chosen?
- Who were the characters (spokespeople, hero/villain)?
- What jargon was used/avoided?
- What multimedia were used?

Recap

-  Be curious on behalf of your reader.
-  Place is powerful.
-  Make it relevant.
-  Do your homework.
-  Build characters.
-  You've got 30 seconds to grab your reader.

-  Have fun with it!

Mushrooms

Overnight, very
Whitely, discreetly,
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses
Take hold on the loam,
Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,
Stops us, betrays us;
The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on
Heaving the needles,
The leafy bedding,

Even the paving.
Our hammers, our rams,
Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,
Widen the crannies,
Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,
On crumbs of shadow,
Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.
So many of us!
So many of us!

We are shelves, we are
Tables, we are meek,
We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves.
Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door.

**Sylvia Plath, from *The Colossus
and Other Poems*, 1960**