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WRITING  
FOR

The New York Times

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## **BOB McFADDEN**

First, I'd like to make some general observations. None of these suggestions should be taken as a proposed rule. We have enough of them, and rules for writers, aside from the need to be grammatically correct and free of bad taste and slang, are generally bad because they limit imaginative expression. Nothing could be worse than a maze of regulations that would funnel a collection of writers, people with a wide range of perceptions and talents into a mold that might produce a New York Times voice.

In long takeouts and many feature articles, the nut graf often does not appear on page one, but trails off onto the jump (especially in those pieces with short page one runs) and sometimes the nut graf is lost altogether. The reason for many of these problems is the delayed lead, a technique that is much overused and should appear sparingly on the front page. Every writer working on non-breaking news sees a feature as an opportunity to show off as a writer. Fine. But many anecdotal leads run way too long, leaving readers to wonder what its all about.

Time elements (yesterday, Monday, etc.) should go immediately after the verb in the lead, when possible. Often it's not possible, as when the time element is to be applied to two thoughts.

We can assume that readers are going to at least look at every story on Page One. The only question is whether we can get them to read on after the first graf. So I think it is desirable to have something in that lead paragraph to lure the reader on: a word, a phrase, a concept or twist, a bit of color that suggests this is going to be fun or intriguing, perhaps a suggestion of mystery or some other invitational teaser. Donald McNeil's piece (Nov. 6)<sup>1</sup> on birders looking for early signs of avian flu is a good example: Bang! Inside an improvised duck blind etc.

We often seem too anxious to plunge into the details of a story before first taking care of certain obligatory business up high. After giving the news in a nutshell in the lead graf of a breaking news story, we need to set the stage, cite the significance of the news and the implications (of today's storm for tomorrow's commute, for example), then to supply a quote and give reaction and bits of mood and context, all before we plunge into the background and the chronology, the bit that starts with: It all began when If we don't take care of these obligations, important material is relegated to the jump, where it may or may not be read.

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<sup>1</sup> **November 6, 2005, Sunday** Late Edition - Final

**Section 1 Page 1 Column 1 Desk:** National Desk **Length:** 1581 words Sentries in U.S. Seek Early Signs Of an Avian Flu

**By DONALD G. McNEIL Jr.**

DAVIS, Calif.

Bang! Inside an improvised duck blind -- her parked car -- Grace Y. Lee presses a switch, and her gun blasts a square of light volleyball net over the dirt road she is watching.

Use a Quotation high up. Somewhere in the third, fourth or fifth graf of every story there ought to be a quotation, and it should be attributed to an identifiable source. There are several good reasons for doing this. One is it reinforces the point of the lead. Another is that it gives verisimilitude to a story, by including a voice other than the writers. It also gives the writer a chance to vary sentence structure, and from the readers standpoint it is a breather from the writers prose, stepping back from the lecturing voice to offer some evidence. There is another good reason for a high-up quote. It forces the writer to look through his/her notes for a voice that backs up and summarizes the point of the article. Doing this helps the writer focus on the articles fundamental point. Bernie Weinraub began nearly all his stories the same way. The first graf would set the scene, and the second would be a quote from one of the actors. I don't advocate anything so rigid, but I think there is much to be said for a penetrating quote high up.

The technique of starting an article with a pronoun (It was He looked across They remembered) etc. is effective, if not overused. Id like to suggest, however, that no more than one article on Page One begin that way. Two such openings give the impression that nobody is in charge.

We are often accused of putting out a front page that is magazine-ish, specifically on Sundays, when news is scarce and we are overloaded with features. While it is slightly oblique to the point of improving writing, I think we must print at least one hard news story on Page One every day, even if we have to reach deep into the barrel. Moreover, even Page One features should incorporate some sense of time and place, giving them the illusion of immediacy. Page One is too often top-heavy with concept stories, not tales of events and people. It de-personalizes the paper and suggests, inaccurately, a world-view of New York Times editors that is excessively cerebral and abstracted.

I think the hardest task in journalism is to write a breaking story beautifully to get the facts straight, of course, but also to vivify a report with color, detail, graceful prose and telling observation, all seamlessly woven under the gun of deadline. Many of our reporters and correspondents are great deadline writers, and their talents should be recognized as often as possible.

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## **BILL McDONALD**

There's no question that the front page is often home to good writing. That's a given; there's a lot of talent here. But what I found over 10 days is that there simply wasn't enough good writing in features as well as in hard news and analytical pieces. My impression, in fact, was that the hard-news side of the ledger was most in need of improvement. The writing there could be leaner, faster, more direct without losing the sophistication and perspective we pride ourselves on.

Too often our straight news stories were difficult, stop-and-go reads. A relatively smooth passage would often be interrupted by a thicket of words: a sentence or a paragraph clotted with clauses and qualifications or flabby with excess verbiage, requiring a second (or third) read. In a couple of cases the writing obscured the underlying point of the piece, forcing the reader almost to divine it, between the lines. I hungered for clear, brisk writing. I often grew impatient as a reader and disappointed as a Times staff member. And the thought occurred, more than once, that the writing had not kept pace with the photography and even the headlines on the page. The pictures often came at events from fresh and unexpected angles, literally and figuratively, and the headlines showed clarity and wit. But the writing was in many cases still the Gray Lady's: dense, lofty, a bit tired, and not readily digestible homework.

## **The Tried and True**

### **I found too many clichés and overused expressions. A sampling:**

The initiatives are already setting off a tug of war..  
High-profile battles  
World-class collections  
A palatial office  
adding clout to an already powerful City Hall that is determined to aim high.  
under the watchful gaze of the police  
because of safety concerns  
bringing much of her cast and crew to tears  
a case that has already cast a long shadow over the White House  
that, in a nutshell..

### **Everybody seemed to be struggling:**

Negotiators were struggling to find language; the French government struggled over the violence; workers are struggling to restore flood protection.

On one front page, the leads of two adjacent stories echoed with the same stale phrase: President Bush on Friday sharply criticized Democrats and: A Jordanian imam sharply criticized the suicide attacks on three hotels. (if criticized is even the right term in that context).

## **Journalese (maybe a subset of Tried and True)**

I found a frequent tendency to use boilerplate nobody-talks-like-this headline language in the bodies of stories.

- lawyers sought to quell any speculation
- the Getty is under siege
- Google's recent moves have stirred concern
- A public figure is facing an indictment, the museum is facing serious questions, homeowners are facing six-figure repair bills.
- That line of attack deepened his political woes by helping to sow doubts alleged that the results were tainted by fraud.

## **Academese**

I also found a tendency to report the news in dry, abstract terms, giving the prose a bloodless, academic feel, almost as if we were regarding events as sociological problems rather than conflicts between human beings.

The initial reports on the rioting in France carried this tone. Here, presumably, was drama of a high order in the streets, yet rather than trying to render it in dramatic terms, the stories too often fell back on a kind of conceptual shorthand: fast-spreading urban unrest escalated dangerously; Chirac promised increased police pressure to confront the violence (meaning the police might crack down on marauding youths?). The government's position allowed discrimination to thrive.

## **Stuffy Language**

In many cases the language was stilted, or high-flown, or official-sounding.

- Officials maintain that something like half the city's 146 traffic lights are operative.
- Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf...emerged victorious on Friday in her quest to lead war-torn Liberia (translation: she was elected president).
- But in its short tenure, Hamas has...
- this chapter in the confrontation with Iran is infused with the memory of the faulty intelligence
- a process of segregation

## **The Over-Stuffed Lead**

A perennial habit that we still haven't kicked: the impulse to throw everything into the first paragraph no, the first sentence; A two-sentence lead is a rarity.

One 54-word example:

MAR DEL PLATA, Argentina, Nov. 4 President Bush's troubles trailed him to an international summit meeting here on Friday as anti-Bush protesters turned violent just blocks from the gathering site, and Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's fiery populist leader, rallied a soccer stadium filled with at least 25,000 people against the United States. [Rallied a stadium?]

## **Take a Deep Breath**

Perhaps the driving force is to say as much as possible before the jump, but I frequently found myself wading through one long sentence after another. To take an example: the lead story on Nov. 11, on the Senates vote to limit the rights of non-combatant detainees, offered nine mostly lengthy sentences in the page one run, each a full paragraph in most cases. The word counts were 39, 56, 50, 24, 16, 53, 23, 46, 54, 47.

Compare that to a briskly written report on the same day, right next door, about a decision by House leaders to postpone a budget bill. (The well-turned lead: Facing defeat, House Republican leaders on Thursday abruptly called off a vote on a contentious budget-cutting bill in a striking display of the discord and political anxiety running through the party's ranks.) The word counts here were 32, 22, 25, 36, 28, 18, 42 (and the one with 36, connecting two different thoughts, could have easily been two sentences, of 24 and 12).

### **How to Write a Feature**

Step A) start assembly by introducing an unfamiliar person by name in the lead; B) attach two or three grafs of anecdotal material; be sure to use the enclosed quote applicator; C) fasten the nut graf securely (note: if the nut slips below the jump, adjustments may be necessary).

Here's what I mean: these three leads appeared on Page One on the same day:

Islamuddin Ahmadiyar, a 22-year-old student, remembers the excitement in this dusty farming hamlet in central Afghanistan when American contractors broke ground two years ago. (The news lead was in the sixth graf)

A year ago, Melanie Fischer, a lifelong Californian, was not entirely sure where Missouri was. So when her husband proposed that they consider moving there, she raced to locate the state on a map printed on her children's placemats.

Well after most of his neighbors had gone to bed, Jerry Blackburn, a resident of the Eastbrook Mobile Home Park, was up late watching television when he saw the tornado warning.

### **The same formula was employed on other days:**

Semou Diouf, holding a pipe in one hand and a cigarette in the other, stood amid the noisy games of checkers and cards in the dingy ground-floor common room of a crowded tenement building and pondered the question of why he feels French.

Islamuddin Ahmadiyar, a 22-year-old student, remembers the excitement in this dusty farming hamlet in central Afghanistan when American contractors broke ground two years ago.

Since Nov. 10, 1999, Lackson Sikayenera has been incarcerated in Maula Prison, a dozen iron-roofed barracks set on yellow dirt and hemmed by barbed wire just outside Malawi's capital city.

So it was refreshing to come upon this feature lead, courtesy of Gardiner Harris:<sup>2</sup>

LONG PRAIRIE, Minn.- Polio was pronounced dead in the Western Hemisphere years ago, after one of the most successful public health campaigns in history. But now it is stealing through a tiny Amish community here in central Minnesota, spreading from an 8-month-old girl to four children on two neighboring farms.

There was no waiting here to find out what the story was about, and though I would have avoided letting “spreading” compete with “stealing” (wonderful word choice), that second sentence is nevertheless compelling enough to pull you into the story.

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## **FRANK BRUNI**

Reading the front page carefully over the last week and half has left me with two principal impressions:

This newspaper is really good. And this newspaper isn't nearly good enough.

On many days I gave the front page a first, quick, half-attentive look and thought: I'm not sure what recommendations I'd make, what editing I'd do, what I'd change. Seems solid. Reads well.

But even on those days a closer look and more consideration suggested that many stories weren't as compelling or lively as they could be. That they could be rendered much more sharply and accessibly than they were. What I found especially troubling: the ways in which the shortfalls of many stories --- the vagueness, flatness, familiar cadences, cliched approaches --- amounted to opportunities for a reader to slip away, invitations to distraction.

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<sup>2</sup> **November 8, 2005, Tuesday** Late Edition - Final  
**Section A Page 1 Column 1 Desk: National Desk Length: 2028 words**  
**5 Cases of Polio In Amish Group Raise New Fears**  
**By GARDINER HARRIS**  
LONG PRAIRIE, Minn.

Polio was pronounced dead in the Western Hemisphere years ago, after one of the most successful public health campaigns in history. But now it is stealing through a tiny **Amish** community here in central Minnesota, spreading from an 8-month-old girl to four children on two neighboring farms.

Even before this exercise, I believed that one of the greatest obstacles to steady or increased readership of all newspapers, and of ours, was how busy people were, how many other ways they could get information, how many other things they could be doing. I believe that all the more now. As I read the front page, I was repeatedly struck by how infrequently I lost awareness of the time I was spending on the activity. Seldom was I tugged along so expertly or enjoyably that I became truly absorbed. Often I grew confused or bored, and thus remained conscious --- or was reminded --- of where and how else I might focus my energy.

Of course every day yielded a different front page, a different stew of stories, their aggregate quality sometimes stunningly fine, their aggregate quality sometimes dispiritingly average. So it's difficult to make sweeping observations, to generalize. But it seems pointless, on the other hand, to present nothing more than lists of stories I liked and stories I didn't, along with the reasons.

So this memo does a little of both. It ignores some front pages entirely. Ditto for many stories. I'll cite a concern for brevity as the reason. You'll correctly surmise that I didn't find the time to digest some pages as well as others.

### **CONVENTION AND CLICHES . . .**

When stories left me cold, the reason was often because they seemed too beholden to conventions: a drearily prefabricated structure; a predictable rhythm; a tired, almost trite Times-ian voice. I understand that convention is a necessary fallback and failsafe, given the pace of daily journalism. And part of what makes our newspaper so successful is how deftly and smoothly we do the conventional.

### **. . . VERSUS STORIES WITH THEIR OWN VOICE AND DIRECT APPROACHES**

The story on Friday, Nov. 11<sup>3</sup>, about colicky babies and the ethnic array of potential remedies used on them could have begun with the fifth paragraphs inventory of those remedies, which would have seemed logical, even inevitable. It could have begun with a generic anecdote or description of a baby gripped by colic.

But the way it began was more inspired, original, even organic, the product of a

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<sup>3</sup> **November 11, 2005, Friday** Late Edition - Final

**Section A Page 1 Column 3 Desk:** Metropolitan Desk **Length:** 1286 words

For City Kept Sleepless by Colic, No End to Cures in Melting Pot

**By NINA BERNSTEIN**

Nearly 200 languages are spoken in New York City, and in all of them, the wail of a colicky baby needs no translation. Nursed, burped, rocked, changed and cuddled, the baby still howls.

Is it indigestion? Gas? Nostalgia for the womb? Nobody really knows. So in this city where 6 of 10 babies have at least one foreign-born parent and pediatricians come from every corner of the world, a cornucopia of **colic** cures serves as a kind of Rorschach test of child-rearing culture in migration.

writer sitting down, reaching for a bit of poetry, not reaching TOO far, using crisp and short sentences, finding a novel rhythm and only occasionally stumbling, as with the forced alliteration of cornucopia of colic cures. As I read the first three sentences, I literally smiled and wanted to keep reading because I was so delighted with the energy in the approach:

*Nearly 200 languages are spoken in New York City, and in all of them, the wail of a colicky baby needs no translation. Nursed, burped, rocked, changed and cuddled, the baby still howls. Is it indigestion? Gas? Nostalgia for the womb? Nobody really knows.*

The phrase nostalgia for the womb --- terrific. That first sentence, which foreshadows the theme of cultural diversity --- also terrific.

Likewise, there was a freshness and energy in the writing of a story on Sunday, Nov. 6<sup>4</sup>, about crowded, horrid African jails. It doesn't seem pumped up with voice-of-God air. It just moves along briskly, the important details accruing:

He eats one meal of porridge daily. He spends 14 hours each day in a cell with 160 other men, packed on the concrete floor, unable even to move. The water is dirty; the toilets foul. Disease is rife.

That last sentence, so unspecific, sort of drags down the paragraph, but the rhythm is nice, and the effort is welcome. And it goes on:

This is life in Malawis high-security prisons, Dickens in the tropics, places of cruel, but hardly unusual punishment. Prosecutors, judges, even prison wardens agree that conditions are unbearable, confinements intolerably long, justice scandalously uneven. The diction here is careful and doesn't seem borrowed from a thousand other stories. I'm not sure about Dickens in the tropics, but I like the attempt. And I like the avoidance of Interviews with dozens of prosecutors, judges and prison wardens paint a picture of or some similar reflex, reflex being the operative word.

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<sup>4</sup> November 6, 2005, Sunday Late Edition - Final  
Section 1 Page 1 Column 5 Desk: Foreign Desk Length: 2643 words  
Wasting Away, A Million Wait In African Jails **By MICHAEL WINES**

**LILONGWE**, Malawi

Since Nov. 10, 1999, Lackson Sikayenera has been incarcerated in Maula Prison, a dozen iron-roofed barracks set on yellow dirt and hemmed by barbed wire just outside Malawi's capital city.

He eats one meal of porridge daily. He spends 14 hours each day in a cell with 160 other men, packed on the concrete floor, unable even to move. The water is dirty; the toilets foul. Disease is rife.

Another story that stood out in some of the same ways, for some of the same reasons: the account on Friday, Nov. 4<sup>5</sup>, about government of a West Bank city. A snappy subject-verb-predicate sentence begins the story on a lively note. Everything about the story seems direct, pointed, and nothing seems bloated. There's color --- taking out his fury on the necks of chickens bound for the dinner pot --- but not a florid amount of it. And big observations are rendered succinctly, even modestly: But in its short tenure, Hamas has also brought a new measure of modernity to this town of 45,000 people.

### ... VERSUS STORIES FOCUSED JUST AS THEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN

On the same day as the marathon story, there was a story on people leaving California for the Midwest. Its lead anecdote was absolutely perfect and absolutely on point (and happened to illustrate the way reliably excellent writing grows from excellent reporting, from the content and the details marshaled for --- and not just the style lavished on -- the story).

A quibble: it's always weird to see a dateline, with date, followed by a time reference like A year ago. The juxtaposition of the date with that phrase at the start of the story

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<sup>5</sup> **November 4, 2005, Friday** Late Edition - Final  
**Section A Page 1 Column 1 Desk: Foreign Desk Length: 1868 words**

## **Voted In, Hamas Sets a West Bank City Astir**

**By STEVEN ERLANGER**

QALQILYA, West Bank, Oct. 29

The mayor won a landslide victory from the inside of an Israeli jail, and still sits there today. The city banned a cultural festival from its grounds, in no small part because singing, dancing and the mixing of men and women reflects "a Western mentality."

And yet, the budget deficit has been tamed, city employees are getting raises and more roads are being paved courtesy of the new party in power -- Hamas.

A lot of eyes are fixed on Qalqilya, where the radical Islamic group Hamas won every seat on the city council five months ago. It was a major shock for Fatah, the dominant faction in the Palestinian Authority, and is emerging as a test case of Hamas's foray into electoral politics.

Hamas, which advocates Israel's destruction and is regarded by Israel and the United States as a terrorist group, is fielding candidates in the Palestinian local and parliamentary elections. Here in Qalqilya, its rule has already set off a fair amount of grumbling that the group is trying to impose a strict Islamist morality.

"They're isolating us!" said Othman Zaid, a poultry merchant in the market, taking out his fury on the necks of chickens bound for the dinner pot. "We used to have many diplomats visiting, and since Hamas took over, I haven't seen one. We've lost some aid and projects."

But in its short tenure, Hamas has also brought a new measure of modernity to this town of 45,000 people. It has tackled the budget and even predicts a surplus. It has introduced previously alien practices, like computerized bookkeeping and competitive bidding on city contracts, and has begun to investigate past corruption.

compounds the already-existing problem with that phrase itself: it seems to contradict the new in newspaper. A year ago could have exited the first sentence/paragraph, and something like a year later could have begun the SECOND paragraph.

But apart from that, this was a terrific opening: A year ago, Melanie Fischer, a lifelong Californian, was not entirely sure where Missouri was. So when her husband proposed that they consider moving there, she raced to locate the state on a map printed on her children's placemats.

On her children's placements --- what a terrific detail in a terrific lead. The lead strikes directly, in the way that the Amazon story doesn't, to the main aspect of this story's appeal: the unlikely nature of the migration. People in sunny, coveted California are moving to places so much less sunny, and so much less coveted, that these people don't really know the first thing about them.

### **VERSUS STORIES THAT DO EXACTLY WHAT THEY INTEND TO.**

By fulfilling their obvious mission, they wind up being satisfying and easy and quick to absorb, even when they're not sexy, when they're underwhelming, when they're the opposite of anything that will generate water-cooler chatter.

An example: the above-the-fold story on Friday, Nov. 4<sup>6</sup>, with the headline, Ideology serves as a Wild Card on Court Pick. It's straightforward and sensible, pointing to an area of debate and mulling a question on many people's minds.

The debate over what criteria senators should use in deciding how to vote on Supreme Court nominees is almost as old as the court itself, begins one paragraph. The next lists the potential criteria, each followed by a question mark. I SPED through this story, and

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<sup>6</sup> **November 4, 2005, Friday** Late Edition - Final

**Section A Page 1 Column 2 Desk: National Desk Length: 1242 words Ideology Serves As a Wild Card On Court Pick**

By SCOTT SHANE; David D. Kirkpatrick contributed reporting for this article.

WASHINGTON, Nov. 3

Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, concedes that Judge Samuel A. Alito Jr. -- a brainy product of Princeton and Yale, a former federal prosecutor and Supreme Court litigator and an appellate judge for 15 years -- has the qualifications to serve on the nation's highest court.

But Mr. Leahy says unapologetically that the stellar résumé is not enough. He says he plans to assess Judge Alito on ideological grounds.

"This is not over competence," Mr. Leahy, ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, said. "He certainly is competent. This is the whole issue of ideology, and if the ideology is one that you go in with a predetermined agenda, then I don't care if they are a Democrat or a Republican. They don't belong on the Supreme Court."

The debate over what criteria senators should use in deciding how to vote on Supreme Court nominees is almost as old as the court itself, because the Constitution offers the scant instruction that justices should be appointed "with the advise and consent of the Senate."

Should education, temperament, experience and integrity be the sole determining factors? Or should ideology, a nominee's political leanings and predictable stands on the hot judicial disputes of the day, also have a major role?

As Judge Alito continued on Thursday to make the rounds on Capitol Hill, senators of both parties examined his views on issues like the separation of church and state.

yet it didn't feel dumbed down in the least.

While I think the front page has fewer feature stories than it needs, I think the features there, inherently advertised even to non-newspaper folks as something special, have to glitter in a way that news stories don't. And too often, they're not all that special.

## **RANDOM EXAMPLES OF SLOPPINESS, ERROR**

False notes, sloppiness and ordinariness really stand out and grate in front-page writing, and while there weren't that many egregious examples, such lapses were easier to find than they should have been.

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## **DEAN MURPHY**

I've broken down my observations into two categories. The first focuses on types of writing that seem to appear too frequently on Page One. The second makes suggestions about some writing techniques we should encourage.

### **A. Ledes that we rely too heavily upon:**

1) **But ledes:** The story begins with a statement, or paints a picture, that is precisely the opposite of what the story is actually about. The word but is used to introduce the real point of the story.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with but ledes, except that they can become lazy shorthand for better writing. And when overused, as I would suggest they were in this sampling of papers, they give the page a sense of predictability that dulls the reader to the story because he/she knows the real point is yet to come.

2) **Colon ledes:** The story opens with a statement in need of elaboration, followed immediately by a colon and the elaboration.

These kinds of ledes, in moderation, are fine and sometimes quite clever (Broder's piece, for example, on Schwarzenegger was wonderfully playful with the no, no, no and no refrain), but when multiple examples occur in the same paper, or within the same story, it signals unimaginative writing or perhaps hasty rewriting. One easy test for reducing or eliminating these kinds of constructions is to remember: People don't speak this way.

### ***As it ran:***

As Iowa finishes harvesting its second-largest corn crop in history, Roger Fray is racing to cope with the most visible challenge arising from the United States ballooning farm subsidy program: the mega corn pile.

***Another way:***

The mega-corn pile has fast become the most visible challenge arising from the United States ballooning farm subsidy program. Soaring more than 60 feet high and spreading a football field wide, a mound of corn behind the headquarters of the West Central Cooperative here resembles a little yellow ski hill.

3) **Stranger ledes:** The story opens with someone who we have never heard of before, and who in fact we will probably never hear about again. This non-person serves anecdotally to make a point that the story elaborates upon. Again, too much of a good thing is not a good thing. And there should be a particular effort to avoid using people in these sorts of ledes with names that, at best, will cause the reader to stumble and, at worst, stop reading any further.

This is not meant as a general repudiation of anecdotal ledes; sometimes they work brilliantly.

4) **Official ledes:** These are the ones that typically accompany government coverage and attempt to do too much in one sentence or paragraph. In a related matter, some of the big-news ledes assume too much general knowledge on the part of the reader. While we don't want to dumb down the news, we also have to consider that on a big story especially one that leads the paper we might draw readers who otherwise wouldn't be interested in the subject. For example, the piece about Bush in Argentina<sup>7</sup>, includes two shorthand references to Hugo Chavez in the first two paragraphs *Venezuela's fiery populist leader* and *Mr. Chavez, who has tried to use the summit meeting to stage a showdown with Mr. Bush* but we never get an explanation about why the two men are at such odds (clearly it is much more than the free trade accord.)

**B. What we need more of on Page One:**

1) **Dialogue/quotations** that captures the way people really speak, not simply make the intended point of the setup graphs. Belluck's piece on floating islands on Sunday, the 6<sup>th</sup>, did this the best. It was raining crazy, he recalled. I said, That winds going to blow that thing right over here. Ten minutes later it did. When it moves, it moves pretty quick. Another nice example is Dillon's career student piece on Thursday, the 10<sup>th</sup>: I'm really stressed out, he said. All the money, the book deals, the agents. It's just crazy.

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<sup>7</sup> November 5, 2005, Saturday Late Edition - Final

Section A Page 1 Column 6 Desk: Foreign Desk Length: 1570 words

**PROTESTERS RIOT AS BUSH ATTENDS 34-NATION TALKS**

By LARRY ROHTER and ELISABETH BUMILLER

MAR DEL PLATA, Argentina, Nov. 4

President Bush's troubles trailed him to an international summit meeting here on Friday as anti-Bush protesters turned violent just blocks from the gathering site, and Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's fiery populist leader, rallied a soccer stadium filled with at least 25,000 people against the United States.

Mr. Chávez, who has tried to use the summit meeting to stage a showdown with Mr. Bush, pronounced dead a free trade accord backed by Mr. Bush, the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Left-wing groups throughout Latin America have long opposed the agreement, and some governments want more generous terms from Washington, so Mr. Bush had come here with hopes of jump-starting the stalled negotiations.

2) **Quotations** that bring a story alive, and break up the long explanatory narrative that often runs dry. In the same Sunday paper, the piece on the Getty Trust was full of wonderful detail and information, but the sizeable front page run did not include a single voice that let us hear one of the players in his/her own words. While it is wise to shy away from the formula of set up graph, quotation, set up graph quotation, it is also unwise to keep dialogue/voices out of a story that is about people.

3) **Descriptive writing** that helps bring the reader into the story and paints a picture that creates a visual image only the reporter can bring about. Though certainly disturbing in its detail, and perhaps at moments too graphic, the Tavernise piece on the Iraqi suicide bombing on Friday, the 11<sup>th</sup>, did this well: The force of the explosion tore limbs from bodies and flung them into Abu Nuwas Street, in the heart of Baghdad, along with pieces of bread and beans from breakfast plates. A human scalp hung from a piece of plaster on the ceiling. . In a war context, this kind of writing can make the reader uncomfortable, and might even offend some, but it also helps convey the horror in a straightforward and objective manner.

4) **Action.** The old rule that it is usually better to write in active rather than passive voice, should have as a corollary that it is better to write actively about an event a reporter witnesses. We should have more scenes in feature stories that unfold before our eyes with the action driving the narrative. A good example of this is the McNeil piece on avian bird flu. Who can't be drawn into a story that begins with a sound? Bang! Inside an improvised duck blind her parked car Grace Y. Lee presses a switch and her net gun, powered by a blank rifle bullet, blasts a square of light volleyball netting over the dirt road she is watching.

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## **DAN BARRY**

I have to confess to feeling uncomfortable, even rotten, at times while critiquing the writing of colleagues who are trying to make sense of complex policy issues while on deadline, or reporting from a war zone. (``Oh look! A split infinitive in this explosion story from Baghdad!) I know too that editors are also often reading copy under the pressure of tight deadlines, and may not have time, say, to recast a lead from passive to active verb tense.

First, I think that the Times should be striving for kinetic energy at every opportunity. It should be thinking about topspin in the writing: the power of words and images to propel the reader forward. We do not always do this, sometimes because of the realities of deadline, and sometimes because of laziness.

### **Quickly, a couple of examples:**

I have an "It" thing, in which "it" is used too often in a sentences construction.  
"It" was Monday morning..."

But here are two quick examples of the Times at the top of its writing game.

This piece from New Orleans, ``At Storm Victims Funeral, (11/14) has the kinetic energy of good writing that does not slip into overwriting. The piece was worth it for this line, in the second graph: ``Some 200 relatives, colleagues, church friends and neighbors crowded into a funeral home here on Saturday to mourn and celebrate both Ms. White, a disaster loan specialist, and New Orleans, a city that could ill afford to lose its disaster specialists.

And this piece, ``Tornado Slams South Indiana; At Least 22 Die, serves as an example of when and how to use a quote.

Well after most of his neighbors had gone to bed, Jerry Blackburn, a resident of the Eastbrook Mobile Home Park, was up late watching television when he saw the tornado warning.

Mr. Blackburn said he called to warn his son, who lives about a half-mile away, and then set off with his wife, Judy, to his son's home to take refuge in the basement.

"We just barely got to the foot of the steps when it hit," Mr. Blackburn said. "I heard this roaring noise."

Blackburn's quote is dramatic, succinct, and well-placed in the story. The gotcha.

### **SUNDAY, NOV. 6**

**Several well-written stories on this day.**

``Rift Grows, Challenging a Museums Leadership is a great story, a complicated story, well told.

``Wasting Away, A Million Wait in African Jails gets to the emotion and horror and outrage very quickly with short, punchy sentences (``The water is dirty; the toilets foul. Disease is rife.)

``Major Offensive Hits Insurgents on Iraqi Border is a study in straightforward, clear, daily journalism.

``Sentries in U.S. Seek Early Signs of an Avian Flu 11/6:

``Bang! Inside an improvised duck blind her parked car Grace Y. Lee presses a switch, and her gun blasts a square of light volleyball net over the dirt road she is watching.

This was a difficult scene to describe clearly, but the writer does it, with panache.

### **TUESDAY, NOV. 8**

The edition has several cleanly written stories on this day. We use simplicity and straightforward writing on the complicated stories that require it: the report of France engulfed in civil unrest, for example, and the piece about the threat of polio in an Amish community in Minnesota. The writer uses a very nice verb stealing to describe the threat of that disease in this tiny Amish world, highlighting how even a straight news story can be elevated by shunning cliché and finding words that breathe life into the report.

Also, the report from New Orleans is nicely done, using the set-up in the first graph (things are getting back to normal) with the left hook in the second graph (not so fast; things are really, really screwed up). The reporters describe ringing telephones in empty offices, and properly use the word ``comatose to describe the city's economy.

I thought this was a great front page, with sharp writing that quickly drew readers in. A perfect mix.

Very quickly, we catch the eye with a spy-thriller style of introduction to ``Relying

on Computer, U.S. Seeks To Prove Irans Nuclear Aims. Intelligence officials, atomic inspectors, at the top of a skyscraper in Vienna, to reveal the contents of a stolen Iranian computer. We also demonstrate great use of quote with the second graph to ``Confusion is Rife About Drug Plan: ``I had a Ph.D. and it's too complicated to suit me, said so-and-so. And we find the sublime on the grilles of trucks (``They're Soft and Cuddly).

But I also liked the set-up to ``In Zimbabwe, Homeless Belie Leaders Claim. The author quotes Mugabe pooh-poohing the notion of people made homeless by his ``civic beautification program, quoting him from a recent television appearance. Then: ``Clearly, Mr. Mugabe has not been to Bulawayo.

Very, very nice.

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## **LINDA GREENHOUSE**

If there was one aspect to our page one that really surprised me over the 10 days, it was the high proportion of anecdotal ledes. Sometimes they work, and sometimes they don't. I've tried to indicate on a day-to-day basis those that gave me an allergic reaction.

In the interests of space, I've focused on criticism, but it goes without saying that nearly every story, including those I might have, or even definitely would have, approached differently, met a high standard. The one story that really left me scratching my head, the Iran nuclear story of this past Sunday (more below) had the mark of too many editors no offense!

Rather than engage in broad generalizations, I thought it would be more useful to go day by day, so here goes:

### **Friday, Nov. 11**

The lede story on Senate passage of the Graham amendment does a good job of providing needed context for a very complicated development. The only thing I would have added to the story as a whole would be the names of the handful of Republicans and Democrats who broke with their parties a couple of the names are given, why not all?

The story on the budget bill postponement is very good on the politics, but I think the page one portion should have contained at least a hint of what the substantive issue might have been that hung the thing up. Not until quite far down into the jump do we learn rather obliquely that food stamps and health care for the poor were among the disputed issues. Not sure what the others were.

On the Katrina school replacement story, the anecdotal lede slows things down without adding value. A better lede might have been constructed out of the 4<sup>th</sup> graf, which tells us what the actual problem is.

The Paris story is one for which the anecdotal lede is well justified. The Senegal-born subject really does seem to personify the issue. It's easy to think of alternative ways into this story, but the one chosen is user-friendly and works well with the photo.

The first few grafs of the colicky baby story are irresistible.

### **Saturday, Nov. 12**

This is another very strong page. The lede on the African election story is perhaps unusually long and packs in a lot of information, but it flows well and I wouldn't take anything out of it. I have only praise for the other ledes on the page. The details at the top of the China and Babys Death stories are so harrowing that it's almost impossible not to keep reading.

### **Sunday, Nov. 13**

I found it hard to follow the Iran nuclear story and to figure out what I was supposed to take away from it. Is the news here that previously undisclosed briefings are taking place, or that some countries believe the evidence, or that some don't believe it? I'm just not sure what the reader is supposed to make of this, and the anecdotal lede gets in the way. If there's news to justify the length and play of this story, just tell us what it is.

The stuffed-animals-on-the-truck story seems about twice as long as necessary. I guess its well done, given the premise. I have no other complaints. I thought the Yale Law School lede was particularly nice, especially the line, . . . were already hard at work to defeat him.

### **Monday, Nov. 14**

Another really strong page. I have no criticisms. The phrase in the New Orleans lede, drowned in her attic is truly arresting. On the Arab secret police story, Neil obviously writes with unusual authority. My only question is whether the long page-one run should someone flag for the reader that this excellent story is going to include a first-person account it comes as quite a surprise deep into the story. The twinned Alito stories manage to say something new not too easy anymore.

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## **PHIL CORBETT**

Too often, I think, when looking for an alternative to a straight-news lede, we immediately fall back on the most familiar choice: a long, winding anecdote. Even when editors conclude that a long anecdotal lede isn't effective, the options usually involve either compressing it to a slightly shorter anecdote, or switching to a straight-news approach.

But on stories that are not hard news (and even, sometimes, on straight stories too), the best ledes are often neither of the above. While it's hard to generalize, these alternative approaches typically hit on short, grabby, surprising, often counterintuitive ways to sum up the essence of the story. Imagine if you had two sentences (o.k, maybe three, but short ones) to explain to a friend what's fascinating about this story.

There's no formula for such ledes, nor would we want one. But often they encapsulate a quick reversal, suggesting, in effect: You might think A, but were here to

tell you, its really B. Or something like: It used to be A; then it was B. But now, its C.

A good recent example was the A1 story about how every company in the country is afraid of Google:

*Wal-Mart, the nation's largest retailer, often intimidates its competitors and suppliers. Makers of goods from diapers to DVD's must cater to its whims. But there is one company that even Wal-Mart eyes warily these days: Google, a seven-year-old business in a seemingly distant industry.*

(In fact, this one could perhaps have been even tighter: It seems every company in America fears Wal-Mart. So who is Wal-Mart afraid of? Google.)

Sometimes variations on this approach can even work for straight-news stories, though we should pick our spots carefully. Consider this recent example from the BizDay front:

*What gas price crisis?*

*From discounters to department stores, retailers reported surprisingly strong results for October, despite fears that high fuel costs would keep shoppers at home.*

Another BizDay example, from last spring, was this lede on a story about the battle over Disney:

*The Magic Kingdom is no longer under assault, but its king remains under siege. The Comcast Corporation, the nation's largest cable operator, abandoned its \$54.1 billion hostile takeover bid for the Walt Disney Company on Wednesday, but the move is hardly a triumph in the storied career of Michael D. Eisner, Disney's chief executive.*

Another approach is a quick, surprising laundry list that leads to a sharply stated summary of the story: There's wacky example A; there's crazy fact B; there's shocking nugget C. And what it all means is D.

An arresting example of this type was the lede of the recent A1 story on stuffed animals decorating trucks. (It was much longer than might generally be best for such an approach, but it worked because the examples were so vivid; in other cases, the punchier the better.)

*A bear with a prominent grease spot on his little beige nose spends his days wedged behind the bumper guard of an ironworker's pickup in the Gowanus section of Brooklyn. A fuzzy rabbit and a clown, garroted by a bungee cord, slump from the front of a Dodge van in Park Slope. Stewie, the evil baby from "Family Guy," scowls from the grille of a Pepperidge Farm delivery truck in Brooklyn Heights, mold occasionally sprouting from his forehead.*

*All are soldiers in the tattered, scattered army of the stuffed: mostly discarded toys plucked from the trash and given new if punishing lives on the prows of large motor vehicles, their fluffy white guts flapping from burst seams and going gray in the soot-stream of a thousand exhaust pipes.*

*Grille-mounted stuffed animals form a compelling yet little-studied aspect of the*

*urban streetscape, a traveling gallery of baldly transgressive public art. The time has come not just to praise them but to ask the big question. Why?*

And sometimes the surprising, counterintuitive lede might actually be an anecdote of sorts, but distilled to its essence, stripped of the shaggy-dog details that can slow stories down and turn readers off. For instance, the recent A1 story about the Syrian official implicated in the Lebanon assassination could have started something like: When a friend introduced Bushra al-Assad to Asef Shawkat 10 years ago, it was love at first sight. He was handsome, powerful and etc. etc. etc. What we did was much better:

*It was a love story that captured the imagination of many Syrians: a man and a woman defied her father, eloped and lived happily ever after. But for many people it was not the romance that made the story compelling, it was how the tale spoke to power.*

The essential point is, reporters and editors should avoid relying on anecdotal ledes as the default mode for feature stories, and be constantly looking for alternatives quick, sharp, readable ledes that surprise the reader but also get right to the point.

## **Headline Writing:**

### **CONTENT**

1. Highlight the Page-One Thought.

If an ongoing story has been covered with inside stories for a few days, then reaches critical mass and is fronted, the hed should be different from what would be written for just another inside story; it needs to step back and reflect the big picture, not just the day's developments.

If it's the political dimension of a story that makes it frontable, that should be reflected in the hed. If a shift or reversal is what's interesting, the hed should highlight that.

If it's not clear to the editor what elements made the story frontable, the desk should discuss it with the news desk. And the news desk should convey to copy desks – as early as possible – any elements of a story that were highlighted in the page one meeting as the frontable thoughts.

2. Avoid Padding.

This is a common problem. Page-one real estate is the most precious resource we have; we should make maximum use of every bit of it.

A frequent tip-off to padding is the use of articles in straight-news heds (as opposed to features, where they might be used for rhetorical effect). Except as a last resort, try to eliminate articles and rework the hed to pack in more information – an adjective, a detail, a stronger verb – rather than giving space away with an awkward and unnecessary “the” or “an”.

Banks, too, are often padded. Rather than using a whole three-line bank for one idea, see if it can be expressed more tersely, leaving a line free for yet another element.

3. Enliven News Headlines.

News heds should tell the news, and should not be clever at the expense of essential information. Don't write a feature hed for a news story.

But that doesn't mean news heds have to be dry or dull. A just-right verb, a surprising modifier, a key detail can attract the reader – and also convey lots of information in a tight space.

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## **FELICITY BARRINGER**

The exercise was enlightening in at least two ways. One, it was a reminder of the amount of time it takes to properly digest the front page every day, particularly when on the road. Two, it was a reminder of the remarkably high caliber and broad ambition of the stories we run, both day stories and longer-term efforts.

The ambition, however, can have its price. I'm going to use a sailing analogy that will make you roll your eyes, but trust me. It works. When hoisting a sail up the mast, the edge has to be fed into a track on the mast's edge. If the first few feet are fed in correctly, the rest is likely to follow. Not guaranteed to, but likely. If the edge gets out of the track and is hoisted anyway, there is much flapping and noise and a great deal of canvas involved, but no coherence or forward motion.

The more ambitious the story, the more essential it follow a logically coherent track. Otherwise, the payoff for the ambition is distracting and unproductive flapping.

Over the past 10 days there have been examples of both well-rigged stories and loud flappers. I'll start with the well-rigged ones. Scott Shane's piece, "Ideology Serves as a Wild Card in Court Pick" sets up the issue in the words of Senator Leahy, a man not easily pigeonholed and flows seamlessly to the words of Jeff Sessions near the end of the story, whose quote is a bookend to Leahy's. Michael Wines's piece on African jails is a prototype for how a serious, underreported issue can be laid out accessibly and in depth. The opening anecdote about the lost file is chillingly on point, the nut graf a model of the breed, especially the section that ends: "Dickens in the tropics, places of cruel, but hardly unusual, punishment." Janny Scott's biographical riff on Alito is similarly expansive and an almost effortless read. It avoids the simple chronological structure which is often so useful by honing in on Alito's experience in the office of legal counsel, then moves backward with a great transitional quote about Alito's research skills, which sets up the section about his father. Ditto the piece by Steinhauer et al on rebuilding New Orleans, a conceptually clear and extremely accessible summary of the issues with great use of quotes, and Alexei Barrionuevo's piece on a glut of corn and subsidies. This last left me with only one question: why can't we give the surplus to Malawi and Darfur? Finally, John Broder's piece on the arc of Schwarzenegger's governorship was more informative than most second-day-after-the-election pieces I've read, giving a sense of both the man and his state, with all their outsized reputations and flaws.

Two other quick observations. First, the stories that are most easily digested are also the stories that are most neatly summarized in the front-page run. This is what led me to the analogy of setting a mainsail – if you get the first few feet in the track, the rest is likely to follow. Craig Smith accomplished this day in and day out with his stories and set-back pieces on French-Arabs rifts and the meaning of Frenchness. But

many other pieces, from Jim Rutenberg's riff on where Bloomberg is headed to Doug Jehl's piece on the CIA inspector general's report on interrogations, get it right.

Second, the feature or news-feature stories can have divergent approaches and still be effective, if the first 10 grafs or so still give a capsule synopsis of what is to come. A few of the features, like Sam Dillon's on the perennial college student, were a bit slow in the framing section, but both it and James McKinley's butterfly-hunter piece were fascinating windows on human foibles. And Jesse McKinley's article on the Woman in White star was a stirring elegy to human perseverance.

My general takeaway is that if the front-page portion of the story is clear and logical and can stand for the whole, flapping sails will be rare. We get it right much more often than we stumble. Also: stories do indeed seem to run long (not mine, of course).

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## **RACHEL SWARNS**

In attempting to evaluate the quality of writing on the front page, I considered several elements: the power of imagery; the originality, liveliness and authoritativeness of language; clarity; the use of quotes; the sense of mood, feeling and whimsy; an avoidance of clichés. But as the mother of an 11-month-old baby, who repeatedly challenged my efforts in this exercise by drooling on and trying to gnaw on my newspapers, I ultimately decided that the critical question was this: Would the writing in our front page stories compel a frenetically busy (and often sleep deprived) reader like myself to read beyond the jump?

If truly evocative writing is what we are after -- the kind that makes you see, smell, feel, laugh or shiver -- then the answer is mostly no. After 10 days of reading, I found that kind writing decidedly in short supply on the front page (and elsewhere, for that matter.) There were certainly some stories with strong and lively writing, including Michael Wines piece on African prisons; Steve Erlanger's piece on Hamas; Nina Bernstein's piece on colic; Sabrina Tavernise's piece on the bombing in a Baghdad café that killed 29 people.

Listen to this paragraph from Sabrina's story: The bomb left a breakfast frozen in time. A fork rested on a plate as if a diner was about to return Lime wedges and saltshakers were scattered on a table, where blood was drying.

Or this lede from Jim Yardley's piece on flaws in the Chinese justice system: *At his most desperate, when he had no more borrowed money for his son's defense, Xie Yujun went to a hospital. He knew of China's black market in body parts. He wanted to sell his eyes.*

But too often, I think, good writing is assumed to be little more than rather humdrum anecdotal ledes on top of rather mundanely written stories.

The front-page must obviously carry more than vividly told stories with mood. Even for me, a writer who has probably written one too many anecdotal ledes herself and

may continue to do so, the Sunday paper of Nov. 6 seemed startlingly dominated by anecdotal ledes. And evaluating the front pages over this period made me wish that more writers and editors viewed hard news and news stories as potential stages for lively writing. I was drawn to strong, clear authoritative pieces like Robin Toner's think piece about the governors races in Virginia and New Jersey and Jim Rutenberg's piece on the mayoral race in New York, where both writers took as much care with their kickers as they did with the bodies of their stories. And John Broder's piece on Arnold Schwarzenegger was another example of a well-written news story. I loved his lede:

*Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's carefully honed image as an Olympian above politics, the peoples governor, a man too wealthy to be bought, the invincible independent, all came crashing down on Tuesday as California voters delivered a verdict on his four ballot measures: No, no, no and no.*

Reading the front pages also made me wish that more writers and editors focused more on writing all the way through a story, rather than on the lede. Sometimes time -- or the lack of time -- makes that difficult to do. But Sabrina Tavernise still managed to do that on her breaking news story on the Iraqi bombing. Sabrina's piece might seem an odd story to celebrate, since it was a hard-news story with a hard-news lede that ended up including something of a grab-bag of the day's news in Iraqi. But it also was one of the best examples of powerful writing that started in the first few grafs and carried throughout the story. (Hassan Fattah's news piece on the hotel bombings in Jordan carried a particularly vivid line, describing how the employees carried the dead and injured out of the hotels on gurneys and handcars usually reserved for baggage. But there was not much more than that.) Gardiner Harris piece on polio was another example of a strong, non-anecdotal lede and some writing that continued throughout the piece.

I appreciated elements of humor and irony deep inside the stories, including Rutenberg's description of Mayor Bloomberg as a man of healthy ego. And great reporting detail such as Janny Scott's description of Alito's marvel over an ordinary bottle of wine. Some reporters certainly have more writer-ly inclinations than others, but a focus on fine, detailed reporting can often bring a story alive. (I loved the detail in Michael Wines' piece, which focused on Malawi, where 12 million citizens have 28 legal aid attorneys and eight prosecutors with law degrees. There are jobs for 32 prosecutors, but salaries are so low that the vacancies go unfilled.)

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## **MARTY GRADEL**

In your charge to us you said "we want to redouble our efforts to make sure articles in the paper, especially on the front page, and especially the tops of the stories, are as clear and compelling and inviting as possible."

Good. Because I didn't see enough that was clear and compelling and inviting as possible. Clear, yes. We do a pretty good job there. But we come up short on compelling and inviting. Perhaps that's because we seem to rely on either the straightforward news lede or the anecdotal.

A good instance of a compelling lede that is neither anecdotal or a straight news lede is Steve Lohr's Google story<sup>8</sup> of Nov. 6. In one graph he tells the reader that even Wal-Mart is afraid of Google. But even this good lede could have been more succinct. We could have said, "Wal-Mart is known to intimidate its competitors and suppliers. But there is one company that even Wal-Mart eyes warily: Google." The quicker we hook the reader, the better chance we have of holding them.

On the same day, Pam Belluck offered the quick hook with "The island of Island Pond had it in for Andrew Renna." But it isn't just the short paragraph that can be compelling. Three paragraphs later Pam writes: "The island, about the size of a football field, made a beeline for Mr. Renna's house --- crushing his three-foot chain-link fence, swamping his red-blue-and purple flagstone patio, wrecking his dock, flooding his shed, hobbling his weeping willow, and drowning the oregano, cilantro, tomatoes and peppers in his garden. Then, with an insouciant shrug, it came to a standstill in Mr. Renna's backyard, an interloper squatting in stubborn silence."

What detail. You have no problem picturing the onslaught. It was good, though, that we edited out "eponymous" and "peripatetic."

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## **REBECCA CORBETT**

During the 10-day review period, there were plenty of examples of well-written, engaging stories on the front page. Virtually all fulfilled the basic requirements of clarity, though not one approached Bill Keller's brevity challenge of writing a story that would hold to the front. Michael Wines' story about the Malawi prison story was powerful, as was Jim Yardley's about a Chinese father's search for justice. Gardiner Harris' story of the rise of polio among the Amish got better the longer you read. Pam Belluck told the story of a moving island in an engaging way. Others did an impressive job of writing both hard news and more explanatory material in an accessible, appealing manner.

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<sup>8</sup> **November 6, 2005, Sunday** Late Edition - Final  
**Section 1 Page 1 Column 1 Desk: National Desk Length: 1789 words**  
**CORRECTION APPENDED**

Just Googling It Is Striking Fear Into Companies  
**By STEVE LOHR**

Wal-Mart, the nation's largest retailer, often intimidates its competitors and suppliers. Makers of goods from diapers to DVD's must cater to its whims. But there is one company that even Wal-Mart eyes warily these days: Google, a seven-year-old business in a seemingly distant industry. "We watch Google very closely at Wal-Mart," said Jim Breyer, a member of Wal-Mart's board. In Google, Wal-Mart sees both a technology pioneer and the seed of a threat, said Mr. Breyer, who is also a partner in a venture capital firm. The worry is that by making information available everywhere, Google might soon be able to tell Wal-Mart shoppers if better bargains are available nearby.

That said, the writing at the paper could be much stronger and stories smoother if editors and reporters showed more restraint and devoted more attention to the craft of writing. A few observations about patters involving writing:

### **LEDES:**

\*Ledes were almost always serviceable; a few were terrific, a number were appealing. There were more than a few, though, that I wishes had gone back for another attempt at being tighter, sharper, fresher or more focused.

\*Ledes in The Times are long. Many lede grafs are two sentences, with a surprising number of three-sentence ledes. A typical front page might look like that of Saturday, Nov. 12. The word count ran from 37 words (the A-hed), to 49 words (the offlede), with the other stories respectively 39, 72, 42 and 38 words. At the very least, those ledes were visually daunting.

During the review period, there were only two front-page ledes that were under 20 words:

Pam Belluck wins the brevity prize, a refreshing 11 word lede:

“The island of Island Pond had it in for Andrew Rena.”

My general observation is that reporters at The Times tend to write pretty long ledes, often slowed down by one or more clauses. A number of newcomers to my department have commented on how the length of ledes gets far less vigilance here than they were accustomed to at other papers.

While some people certainly are tough-minded and graceful about decluttering ledes, a number of editors and reporters have remarked that it is not unusual for ledes to get longer and more cluttered with clauses in response to queries from the news desk, copy desk or top editors.

The fact is, you can only stuff so much information in a lede without making it deadly or overwhelming. A careful reading of the front page suggests that reporters and editors in virtually every department can be more disciplined in selecting what information is in the lede – and what isn't.

\*Ledes tend to be of two types: Straight, hard-news ledes, and indirect ledes, usually anecdotes that take several paragraphs to unravel. Some in each category were remarkably well done. (Jim Yardley's lede on the father who wanted to sell his eyes to raise money for his son's legal fees made me wince.) By contrast, two stories that began with weak anecdotes, however, stopped and told reporters they were anecdotes, a clunky thing to do.

Most startling to me were how few beguiling, one-sentence direct ledes appeared. Arguably, those are the hardest to write and the most memorable; more of them would enliven Page One, as well as accelerate the pace.

Several writers almost hit the mark. (Each of these were appealing, but they required two sentences. I could easily see ways to do no harm but still make each of these one sentence.)

Nina Bernstein: “Nearly 200 languages are spoken in New York City, and in all of them, the wail of a colicky baby needs no translation. Nursed, burped, rocked, changed and cuddled, the baby still howls.”

Gardiner Harris: “Polio was pronounced dead in the Western Hemisphere years ago, after one of the most successful public health campaigns in history. But now it is stealing through a tiny Amish community here in central Minnesota, spreading from an 8-month-old girl to four children on two neighboring farms.”

Sam Dillon: “Nearly every college has some screwball who never seems to graduate, lingering year after year as classmates move on. And then there is Johnny Lechner.”

\*Ledes sometimes are changed, and not always for the better, for design reasons. Scott Shane’s ideology story, while nicely done, originally had a historical lede; since it was a stepback story, that was not an inappropriate choice. Because it ended up at the top of the page, though, it was deemed in need of a newsier lede; what emerged was perfectly utilitarian, but less surprising. Robert Pear, who wrote a voices story about confusion over the Medicare drug benefit, had to rewrite it as an A-hed. Many stories are pliable and can be told in any number of ways. But it should be noted that reporters and editors complain about the regularity with which design needs or A-hed needs dictate change in ledes that may not be the best way of telling the story.

### **CLARITY AND ORGANIZATION:**

Most front-page stories met the most basic journalistic test: they were clear and sensibly organized.

Some writers were remarkably efficient at explaining complicated material. Michael Slackman did a terrific job of writing about the Amman bombings and explaining why Jordanians were ready to blame Israelis for the hotel attacks. Michael Wines’ Zimbabwe story moved quickly, clearly and had appropriate context. Ditto a number of the stories about the violence in France or Carl Hulse’s congressional news, and a number of news features.

### **VOCABULARY, VARIETY, FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE, SCENES, USE OF QUOTES:**

Some writers demonstrated an imaginative spark and real mastery of the craft of writing, including vocabulary choices, the telling detail, variety in sentence structure and length, use of trenchant quote, figurative language. From Michael Wines’ prison story: “This is life in Malawi’s high-security prisons, Dickens in the tropics.”

Pam Belluck recognized the power of verbs and parallel construction: “The island...made a beeline for Mr. Renna’s house—crushing his three-foot chainlink fence, swamping his red-blue and purple flagstone patio, wrecking his dock, flooding his shed, hobbling his weeping willow, and drowning the oregano, cilantro, tomatoes and peppers in his garden.

There were plenty of other examples of writer show used a lot of tools in the kit. Gardiner Harris gets special credit for describing smells in his Amish story, the most neglected descriptive element.

There were a surprising number of clichés or weirdly mixed metaphors that survived, including “bare-knuckled,” “weighed in the balance,” “at a crossroads,” “carefully honed.” “Bang!” to communicate a gunshot should be avoided. There was too much journalese: “parlayed,” “causing consternation,” “fired with zeal.” Normal people don’t talk that way.

The article about the mother accused of killing her child had a 72-word lede, followed by a paragraph nearly twice as long. Each relied on a bunch of sentences that were mostly of the same length and had the same subject-verb-object construction, all of them recitations of the this happened-that happened-then that happened variety. Repetition can be powerful; this was monotony. Some other writers, too, didn’t have a sense of rhythm.

Other than Sam Dillon’s use of the word “screwball,” there were few vocabulary choices that were just delightful. And few, if any reporters used analogies or figurative language that helped illuminate a point.

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## **JAMES BENNET**

I came away from this review feeling that there’s a kind of bipolarity creeping into the writing. Features during this period were extremely writerly; some, I thought, really gilded the lily. We seemed less ambitious about the writing of our news stories. At times we even sounded a bit jaded about our own stock-in-trade, news. This was not a problem on big news days. But it was a problem on days of less obvious news.

You just can’t have an anecdotal lead on a news story if you don’t have a telling or powerful anecdote like the astonishing, appalling story<sup>9</sup> Shaila Dewan led with on

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<sup>9</sup> November 13, 2005, Sunday Late Edition - Final  
Section 1 Page 1 Column 6 Desk: National Desk Length: 1217 words  
Bungled Records Of Storm Deaths Renew Anguish  
By SHAILA DEWAN

BATON ROUGE, La., Nov. 11  
The Parris and the Arceneauxs, friends for more than three decades, died together during Hurricane Katrina in the Arceneaux home on Fable Drive in the town of Meraux, east of New Orleans in St. Bernard Parish. All four of them were huddled together, wearing life vests.

Nov. 13 -- and you can't build color or analysis into the top of a story if you don't really have it. But, of course, we should have it.

Mixed metaphors should not be appearing on the front page of the paper. It just shouldn't happen. I counted at least four during this period, one in a lead sentence, on 11/7: Even by the bare-knuckled standards of national political campaigns, the contentious race for New Jersey governor has been venomous. Brawlers with fangs? Snakes with fists?

In general, the stories that really showed signs of writerly strain, and maybe editorial inattention, were the features. It's as though innocuous features have been set aside by reporters or editors as playgrounds for extra words.

In general, we seem to be letting our guard down a bit on stuffiness and jargon. On Nov. 10, in the story on the Jordan bombings, we reported in the second paragraph that, at the wedding that was attacked, numerous Jordanian notables were in attendance. And consider the lead on the Nov. 4 story about buying bits of books on online. The first paragraph describes how companies are developing systems to allow consumers to purchase online access and trying to combine their already available systems of searching books online with a commercial component. Finally, to gin up some drama, the paragraph falls back on the jargon of advertising, promising that all this vague fiddling could revolutionize reading. Yet the reader who fights his way through this thicket is rewarded. In the second paragraph, the writer steps back a bit, relaxes, and starts to tell a story: Consumers could purchase a single recipe from a cookbook, for example, or a chapter on rebuilding a car engine from a repair manual. Why not start the story from there?

Some of the stories that stood out the most for me weren't exactly news or features. They were newsy -- written off the news and they had in common a confident, analytical voice, sometimes even an amused voice. I'm thinking of Scott Shane on the role of ideology in evaluating Alito; Steve Lohr on Google; Gardiner Harris on polio among the Amish; Robin Toner on the election results; John Broder<sup>10</sup> on

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That much, their children thought, was straightforward. Until the bodies were returned to them from the central morgue at St. Gabriel, La., and the death certificates arrived.

<sup>10</sup> **November 10, 2005, Thursday** Late Edition - Final

**Section A Page 1 Column 2 Desk:** National Desk **Length:** 1449 words

**THE 2005 ELECTIONS: CALIFORNIA; NOT ON BALLOT, SCHWARZENEGGER IS STILL REBUKED**

**By JOHN M. BRODER**

LOS ANGELES, Nov. 9

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's carefully honed image as an Olympian above politics, the people's governor, a man too wealthy to be bought, the invincible independent, all came crashing down Tuesday as California voters delivered a verdict on his four ballot measures: No, no, no and no.

Schwarzenegger's ballot defeat; Craig Smith<sup>11</sup> on French identity. I know there's concern at the paper now about writing with voice. I'm not advocating a politicized voice, of course, or even a snide or snarky one (OK, sometimes I do advocate that I wish we could be a little less solemn, sometimes, particularly about politics). Yet all these pieces were written with strong, authoritative voices and point of view. The writers are all very much in control of their information, sure of what it means. There's solid reporting, but its being deployed to build a story, an essay, even, that is making a point or even more than one. One happy result is clarity. The writers don't hesitate to take the reader by the hand and guide them through, using assertion, not just quotes. Look at Harris third paragraph: The story of how polio came to this dairy farming community of 24 families both a medical whodunit and a cautionary tale, suggesting that eradicating polio may prove far harder than anyone thought, even in the developed world. I want to read the rest! Shane's piece is conceived and written with the same kind of confidence and control. He's not just quoting senators expressing concern about Alito's ideology, which would have certainly been one way to approach the story. Instead, he establishes some elevation over what is happening to explain why it's unusual and important, and why it presents a conundrum: The nomination poses questions about the unwritten rules to decide on a confirmation. I was glad that no one felt the need to tag these stories as q-heds.

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<sup>11</sup> November 11, 2005, Friday Late Edition - Final  
Section A Page 1 Column 5 Desk: Foreign Desk Length: 1434 words France  
**Faces a Colonial Legacy: What Makes Someone French?**

**By CRAIG S. SMITH**

PARIS, Nov. 10

Semou Diouf, holding a pipe in one hand and a cigarette in the other, stood amid the noisy games of checkers and cards in the dingy ground-floor common room of a crowded tenement building and pondered the question of why he feels French.

"I was born in Senegal when it was part of France," he said before putting the pipe in his mouth. "I speak French, my wife is French and I was educated in France." The problem, he added after pulling the pipe out of his mouth again, "is the French don't think I'm French."