Inverted-Pyramid Style of Writing

Traditionally, when you write, you start with a 'foundation' and gradually build to a conclusion in a pyramid style. You might write an essay or article using the following structure:

1. Problem statement
2. Related work
3. Methodology
4. Results
5. Conclusions

Journalists, on the other-hand, use an inverted pyramid style. They generally start with the main conclusion and get progressively more detailed, like so:

1. Conclusion
2. Supporting information
3. Background and technical details

A press release isn't a mystery novel—you aren't going for a surprise ending.

To understand the inverted pyramid style of writing, picture an upside down triangle. The base of the pyramid is now on top (or at the beginning of a story) instead of at the bottom.

An example of regular pyramid story might be an old-fashioned mystery story where the reader is introduced to more and more important clues as he/she reads on. It is only after collecting all those clues that the reader can finally start to solve the mystery. With an inverted pyramid story we give away the solution (or in our case a summary) at the very beginning. The rest of the story contains lesser and lesser important information until we just stop.

The inverted pyramid story contains just two parts: a lead (pronounced leed and sometime spelled lede) and a body. There is no fixed ending or conclusion to the story. When you run out of story to tell you just stop.

But first, a few other key points deserve mention:

• Your job as reporter is to report the opinions of others. Leave your opinion out of the story. The term for introducing your own opinion into a story is called editorializing. Leave all mention of yourself out of the story. Avoid such phrases as, "when asked about the (something) so-and-so said . . .". Who did the asking? You did. You just introduced yourself into the story. If someone else did the asking and you want to use that wording, then say who did the asking. "When asked by his coach, so-and-so said . . .".
• Chronological presentation of information may have a place in your story, but your lead should shun chronology and go for the overall summary.

• Rare is the story that cannot be improved with multiple sources. While you won't have much control of that with the workbook assignments we'll be using, in your realworld writing, look for multiple sources who have multiple points of view.

• In all of newswriting, it is best to keep your paragraphs short. As a general rule of thumb, we keep our paragraphs confined to just one sentence. This is vastly different than you've been taught in your composition classes where you write a theme sentence and build on it.

• Another general guideline is that your sentences should have an average of 20-28 words. The number varies based on who you talk to, but you get the idea. Don't spend forever counting words, though. That is an average. You should have shorter sentences/paragraphs and every once in a while you are going to have longer ones. Back when we used typewriters, I was taught that anything more than four lines of typewritten copy was too long for a sentence/paragraph. It was just another way of saying the same thing.

Today, there is an even stronger motive for the survival of the inverted pyramid: Today's readers are bombarded with all kinds of media messages. They must ration their time spent with the media and must decide quickly which stories to read.

Studies show that the average readers today scan the newspaper's headlines and photos and from them decides to stop at only a few stories. Once stopped, they may read only the first couple of paragraphs of story and then move on. (The challenge, of course, is to write such a doggone interesting story that readers read the story from start to finish, but that rarely happens).

If readers only read the first few paragraphs and move on, we certainly want to give them the most important information. If readers stop after just one paragraph, they should walk away with a general understanding of the story. If they read two paragraphs, they have the general understanding and the next most important or interesting information. And so on, throughout the story. The weak writer is the one who buries an important detail deep in the story.

   Another reason to make sure you start the story with a summary is because today's readers are so used to radio and television news, which rarely go beyond the summary lead. If newspapers want to compete, they've got to provide the readers with something somewhat familiar. The folks at Gannett Newspapers realized this when they introduced USA Today newspaper. They consciously have reduced the size of stories to no more than nine inches deep for most stories. They've found a large audience who simply wants a nugget of news.
An example of burying the lead

In my newspaper days many years ago I worked with a lot of untrained writers who gave us news releases of club happenings. I remember one day receiving a news release from the local garden club. The story, written by a really nice little old lady, was written in a chronological format.

According to the story, first the club reviewed the minutes of last month's meetings, and then went over some old business. After that they tackled new business.

Three pages into the story she got to the last item of the meeting, the guest speaker, who was some big muckety-muck from the Department of Agriculture, who told them how to avoid an infestation of a new plant parasite cropping up around the state.

Shoot, the words of the guest speaker were, by far, the most important and interesting part of the meeting. So important and interesting, in fact, that they should have been on page one of the small town paper. Even those not affiliated with the garden club could benefit from the speaker's words. But they were buried so deep into a story that was destined to be buried itself somewhere deep inside the paper.

We rewrote the story and gave it the play it deserved.

Ending your story

When I took journalism in high school a common question we asked our instructor when we were given assignments was, "How long should this story be?" As adviser to student publications for more than 20 years I've lost count how many times new reporters have asked that question.

My high school journalism teacher's answer to the question was cryptic: She'd simply answer, "As long as a piece of string." Of course, we didn't understand that answer, so she would explain: "A piece of string is as long as it is, no longer. And if it needs to be shorter you can cut it." Oh, right, that made sense!

What she was trying to tell us was to let the story determine how long it needs to be. Do your research. Sort your thoughts. And write the story. When you are done telling the story, simply stop. Don't try to make it longer than it is by adding superfluous words. Don't try to put a conclusion on it. Simply stop.

You'll be surprised. The more you research your story, the less you'll worry about how long you have to make it. Instead, you'll worry about how short to make it. You'll
have to decide what to leave out. And then some fool editor will come along and cut your piece of string and make it shorter. Just be sure you've put the most important stuff at the top.

The nut graf has several purposes:

- It justifies the story by telling readers why they should care.
- It provides a transition from the lead and explains the lead and its connection to the rest of the story.
- It often tells readers why the story is timely.
- It often includes supporting material that helps readers see why the story is important.