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Method to the madness - How to write an Economist Leader

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A very distinct structure of the **Economist Leader** articles emerges, after a careful analysis



In this post, I aim to inspire other journalists and bloggers to apply the structure of the Economist leader to tell their own arguments.

“The leader” is one of the most important products the magazine delivers every week for its print and online edition. A guide of its composition was shared by editors in a training session some time ago (I worked at the paper in the past). I want to share with you some of the lessons because I think it could enrich the work of others in the profession.

Before going deeper into its structure, a brief discussion on what a leader is in the eyes of the paper: It is a device to tell the reader what is important, to help sharpen readers argument, and occasionally to change their minds. For new and emerging journalists, it can be hard to write it, says

one editor. A clear structure can be a remedy for any novice.

The Economist uses the leader for two reasons:

1. Importance of current events: to help readers understand current important situations, while explaining an agenda
2. Issues that faded into the background, but are worth it to dig up again: Events and topics that mostly aren't news right now, but ought to be on readers' agenda. It's about saying that something matters, as much as it is about how suspending its conclusion is.

A shorter description is offered: "If pieces are stories, leaders are arguments". There is a sense of importance and this is why, many times, leader arguments make it on the cover. Cover story and leaders are connected.

The leader wants to help readers to form their arguments. There are a number of ways those arguments are of importance. One of those argument-types is often referred to as "mind caring". This is mainly about untangling the mess of a specific event (see the leaders on Donald Trump, protectionism, major despots of our time ... - the list is long).

It is also often the province of economic leaders, where many times contradictory arguments are being called out. Those leaders help to understand what's important, and which of those matter most and are likely to win a debate.

The second type of leader is the "missing the point leader". Those will make the argument that the real problem around a topic is in fact buried somewhere else. Those leaders are fruitful, as one editor says. The leader on unintended consequences is a growing and rich theme (regulations that are supposed to make the world safer, but in fact have little or the opposite effect).

The Dodd Frank act, and the unintended consequences on the intent to kill the regulation, is an [older example](#). Some of the best leaders written on ethics emerge from that direction.

A leader on murder wouldn't be right and is likely boring - being boring is a cardinal sin, says one editor. The best leaders for example about ethics have the ability to surprise. Leaders on ethics, that have a counterintuitive or surprising conclusion (e.g. a leader on legalising prostitution).

Structure

Usually, a leader covers a number of basic elements. Sometimes authors decide to leave out components, sometimes building blocks appear in a slightly different way or sequence.

The basic components of a leader in the following sequence:

1. Introduction: The start contains an enticing observation, and the theme -> 2. News/contemporary event -> 3. The nub -> 4. Stand back -> 5. Your arguments -> 6. Their arguments -> 7. What to do about it

While explaining each, let's talk about an [example](#) from the current edition.

Sex and power

The capitalist case against sexual harassment

How workplaces can rid themselves of pests and predators



[Print edition | Leaders >](#)

Oct 21st 2017



1. Introduction:

Most leaders begin with an observation, almost never is the start a statement of the news peg (it rarely works because it seems flat). Those very first thoughts are many times of an emotional nature.

They can be moving, funny and are enticing. Many times they go against the conclusion, may even provoke and correlate with the public opinion. Usually they are short, a little paragraph, both relevant and fitting to the core argument(s).

The second component for the introduction is to state the theme; or answering: "What is this all about?"

2. News/contemporary event:

Here the author drops the news-peg. In the case of the "Sex and power" leader, it is New York Times investigation into Harvey Weinstein and his response to the allegations.

3. The nub - the punctuation point that sets up everything else to come:

Often missing, the first section of the leader ends with the nub. It is being described as giving the leader its momentum, the bit of tension in the argument and the part where the author states what's wrong. An example is where the author of "Sex and power" writes: "A throwback who loves women too much, then; a sly old rogue who doubtless holds doors open for women, too? Nonsense. What Mr. Weinstein is accused of was never acceptable. It has never been good form to greet a woman arriving for a business meeting while wearing nothing but an open bathrobe".

In a column piece, this bit can be included too, but usually further down. The characteristics of the leader pulls this section up, near the beginning (many times, it is right before the first crosshead, in our case before the crosshead "Not Safe For Women" - the crosshead marks usually the boundary between first section and rest). The nub draws readers in, and explains why to read this leader - REALLY, Weinstein's behavior was never acceptable.

4. Stepping-back and giving context and background:

This is the point when the author explains the context, historical entanglements and the chance to elaborate how we got here. For politics, many times readers get a history lesson. For an economics and business leader such as "Sex and power", we are told about the 1970ties and 1980ties and offices with "Mad Men-style ordeal of leering eyes and roaming hands".

5. and 6. Deploy a balance of arguments:

Here, the author positions the arguments. Data journalists particularly, may enjoy their bit of fun at this point allowing to drop their statistical theses and throw around arguments based on numbers. Showing both, yours and theirs is crucial. Set a balance between pro and contra arguments while keeping it brief (usually, each paragraph here is a single argument).

One editor says that an author carefully takes on the opponent's argument, which usually a close observation of the pro-arguments can overtrump. As one editor explains, this section is an important part of the leader where the authors grapple with the good arguments against the overall argument - a notion that makes the leader a good and powerful medium for journalism. It requires to retain a fair view on a topic.

7. Last bit of the leader: The prescription

This section describes the mess is short and offers possible solutions - an opportunity to respond to the collection of both sides of an argument - more importantly may urges the author to choose the very best argument and respond with the best bet of a solution.

For “Sex and Power”, it is the bit where the author likens sexual harassment with homophobic remarks. For sexual harassment to be stopped, it needs to be called out in the same way, not just by the victims, but also by the witnesses.

Each leader's narrative usually accounts for one page, around the 1,000 word mark (many times the topic are further extended in other parts of the paper). Elections, Brexit, industries in transformation, and Tech, all those are instances of topics leaders can embrace. They are brazing and prevailing affairs in the present news-landscape. To a greater or lesser extent, a leader settles a score with a person, an event or a trend, which usually isn't just going away tomorrow or next week.

With the medium of those leaders, there is one of the company's most important products: a exegesis of how to fathom the world. The magazine also delivers those in a single voice – there are no bylines.

Hoping not to share too much of the secret sauce of the magazine that I admire very much for its work, I can only appreciate those lessons and use some of the idea for my own work.

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 Updated: October 22, 2017

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