

HOW TO UNDERSTAND ENGLISH NEWS

A Comprehensive Guide to Reading English News



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MP3

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PART I

Reading Comprehension Methods



Understanding the Opening Sentence (Lead) of a Story

In newspaper language, the “**lead**” (also spelled “**lede**”, though mostly by journalists) contains the most important information in a story. In the lead, reporters do their best to answer the **5Ws and H** :

who

what

where

when

why

how

This desire to put as much information as possible into (usually) the first sentence of an article is one of the main reasons that leads can be difficult for ESL readers to understand. In this chapter, you will gain a better understanding of how leads are created and how to examine them. The best way to understand the opening sentence of a story is to identify the main **subject** and **verb**. Look at the following examples:

Subject and main verb :

A bomb **blew up.** → This helps answers the basic question “**What happened?**”
 Subject + Verb

Additional Information

Where did the incident happen?	A bomb blew up near <u>a market in Baghdad</u> .
When did the event take place?	A bomb blew up near a market in Baghdad <u>on Monday</u> .
What was the result?	A bomb blew up near a market in Baghdad on Monday, <u>killing eight people and injuring 25</u> .
What kind of bomb?	A <u>car</u> bomb blew up near a market in Baghdad on Monday, killing eight people and injuring 25.
Who said that?	A car bomb blew up near a market in Baghdad on Monday, killing eight people and injuring 25, <u>police and medical officials said</u> .

News stories are often filled with **adjectives** (**devastating, crowded**) and **adverbs** (**suddenly, tragically**) that add information to nouns and verbs:

Washington—A **devastating** car bomb blew up **suddenly** near a **crowded** market in Baghdad on Monday, **tragically** killing eight people and injuring 25, police and medical officials said.

Regarding the length of the lead, the one above is 27 words, but many are longer than that as reporters try to put as many important details into one sentence as they can. Still, although it is not all that long, it may be confusing to some readers. It is important to remember that, simply put, the main information is this:

A bomb blew up near a market in Baghdad.

Being able to identify the main information is critical to understanding news articles.

2-1

Identifying the Subject and Main Verb of a Lead

The most common pattern in English sentences is:

Subject + **Verb** + Object

Journalists often follow this pattern, as in the following examples:

The UK government **has decided** . . .

Environmental experts **are meeting** . . .

World leaders **agreed** . . .

A man **died** . . .

As mentioned above, adjectives and adverbs are often added to nouns and verbs.

Adjectives are typically added **in front of** nouns:

The **angry** workers . . .

The **difficult** problem . . .

A **three-year-old** boy fell . . .

The **yearlong** crisis . . .

12 **HOUSTON**—Extending their winning streak to 11 games, a stretch that began when Chris Paul returned from a month-long absence due to a knee injury, the Houston Rockets defeated the Charlotte Hornets 108–96 Wednesday night.



Chris Paul (far right)
(cc by Keith Allison)

- ▶ What is this story about? _____
- ▶ Why was Chris Paul absent before? _____
- ▶ How many games in a row have the Rockets won? _____

13 **WASHINGTON (VOA)**—Robert Mueller, the special counsel leading the investigation into Russia's interference in the 2016 US election, received a strong vote of confidence Wednesday from the Justice Department official who appointed him and oversees his work.



Robert Mueller

- ▶ Who is Robert Mueller? _____
- ▶ What happened to him? _____

PART II

Sample News Stories



1 Pilotless Planes Becoming a Reality

MOUNTAIN VIEW, CA, Dec. 28—

The technology for pilotless planes has been **progressing steadily** for a number of years now. Pilotless drones already take flight and have a variety of applications for the military, law enforcement, and **commercial** interests. Although more difficult to implement, pilotless commercial planes may begin to carry both cargo and passengers over the next decade. Many of the world's largest airlines are looking to a future where pilotless aircraft will fly on a regular basis.

Two of the world's largest commercial aircraft manufacturers, Boeing and Airbus, are both moving forward with plans to test pilotless aircraft in the very near future. Following the lead of automobile manufacturers who have made great **strides** in driverless car technology, the airlines see pilotless aircraft as the wave of the future.

Currently, planes used by commercial airlines rely on autopilot features that utilize GPS and many other technologies. At cruising altitude, the aircraft **essentially** fly themselves toward the destination unless the pilot deems intervention necessary to avoid turbulence or other problems. In some aircraft, autopilot can even land the plane.

To fly without a pilot, a plane needs a multitude of sensors and artificial intelligence technology. While these pieces of the puzzle already exist, the regulations and testing requirements for the planes will be rigorous. Presently,



drone camera and sensor pod module

pilots must have years of training before they can fly passengers commercially. The artificial intelligence technology in the pilotless planes must be able to mimic or surpass what would be considered good judgment by a pilot in emergency situations.

Since demand for flights is expected to increase dramatically over the next decade, the airlines will need tens of thousands of new pilots to fly planes. Pilotless aircraft, while initially being disruptive to the industry by putting some pilots out of work, may actually become necessary for the survival of the airlines.

Commercial flights are only one area where the technology will be put to use. Airbus has begun testing a pilotless flying car called Vahana. This vehicle has numerous applications, with the immediate one being a flying taxi. Passengers would book a flight on the air taxi using their smartphones, very similar to hailing a ride with Uber. The Vahana air taxi would have a range of about 60 miles, but would not have to deal with traffic or other ground-related drawbacks.

Vocabulary

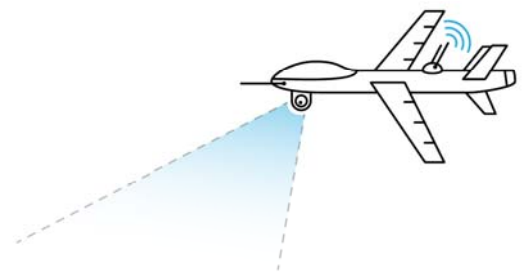
Using the context in the news article, choose the synonym of each word.

- | | | |
|---------------|-------------|-----------------|
| 1 progressing | a speeding | b advancing |
| 2 steadily | a regularly | b gradually |
| 3 commercial | a popular | b profit-making |
| 4 strides | a steps | b parades |
| 5 currently | a presently | b directly |
| 6 essentially | a typically | b practically |

Comprehension

Choose the correct answer for each question.

- Who will initially be put out of work by this new technology?
 - The mechanics who work on the planes.
 - The pilots who fly the planes.
 - The flight attendants assisting the planes.
 - The computer technicians who write software for the planes.
- What do planes currently rely on to essentially fly themselves?
 - The autopilot features in the plane.
 - Artificial intelligence from the computers.
 - Sensors outside the aircraft.
 - Judgment of the pilot.
- How will Vahana probably be used?
 - As a military application.
 - As a vehicle to deliver goods.
 - As a replacement for a commercial plane.
 - As an air taxi.



Critical Thinking

- What do you think the immediate reaction from pilots will be to this news?
- Explain in your own words the main topic of this news article.

1 Breakfast for Buses

LONDON, November 20—

London's buses are known the world over for their bright red paint jobs and two stories of seats. Starting today, however, they have another **distinguishing** feature: coffee in their gas tanks.

Bio-bean, a young British technology company, has joined forces with energy giant Shell, the British government, and thousands of cafés, restaurants, and factories to produce a biofuel which is 20 percent coffee oil. So far, some 6,000 liters (1,585 gallons) of the fuel have been produced, enough to power a single London bus for one year.

After gathering the **spent** grounds from coffee shops, restaurants, and instant coffee manufacturing plants, bio-bean dries them at its recycling center in Cambridgeshire before **extracting** their oil. This is then mixed with standard diesel fuel to create a B20 compound which buses can run on without any **modifications**.

Bio-bean claims that coffee grounds are around 20 percent oil by weight, making them an excellent clean energy resource. And with an estimated 500,000 tons of grounds being produced in the UK annually, supply is not an **issue**.

While the use of coffee **refuse** as bus fuel is new in London, it's just the latest step in the capital's ongoing effort to reduce auto emissions through the **employment** of biofuels. Many of the

city's 9,500 public buses are already running on compounds which include waste from cooking oil, meat production, and other sources. With objection to food-based fuels growing, waste-based options are being eagerly pursued by the government.

But the benefits of bio-bean's fuel run both ways. Most of Britain's used coffee grounds are tossed in landfills, where they don't just sit innocently but emit harmful gases of their own. Recycling them into biofuel prevents this.

Although there is as yet no plan to continue using the coffee-based B20 in London beyond this trial period, bio-bean is optimistic about the future. Plans for expansion in Europe are already being made, and the company sees the United States—where over 400 million cups of coffee are drunk every day—as a **potentially** huge market. Whatever happens, for the moment some of London's famous buses are running on the same fuel as their passengers.



Vocabulary

Using the context in the news article, write your own definitions in English for each word. Then, check the dictionary to see how you did.

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 distinguishing _____ | 5 issue _____ |
| 2 spent _____ | 6 refuse _____ |
| 3 extracting _____ | 7 employment _____ |
| 4 modifications _____ | 8 potentially _____ |

Comprehension

Answer the following questions.

- 1 When did the use of coffee-based biofuel on London's buses begin?

- 2 How much of the coffee-based biofuel is needed to operate a bus for one year?

- 3 What is the main reason for London's use of biofuels on buses?

- 4 Where does bio-bean hope to do business in the future?

Critical Thinking

- 1 Explain in your own words how bio-bean's coffee biofuel is made.
- 2 Why do you think food-based fuels are becoming less popular?

