Bullet list basics

Bullet lists can be useful tools in a publication, allowing information to be presented in an orderly, logical and concise way, and breaking complicated material into smaller, understandable items.

List length

Keep lists short, if possible. Readers can lose track of the material that introduces the list if the list contains more than about 10 items.

One way to deal with long lists is to group items to form a hierarchy of bullets and dashes. Another is to use headings for subgroups of items within the lists, to help readers locate relevant items.

Length of list items

Keep the wording of the list items concise and consistent. The items in a list work best when all or most are single words or short phrases. The visual cohesion of a list is impaired if the items are too long or irregular in length.

Parallel list structure

The items in a list must be 'parallel' – that is, have the same grammatical construction, so that they all follow on from the text that introduces the list:

The main outcomes of the project were:

- identification of contributing factors
- development of an evaluation method
- completion of a preliminary evaluation. [Each item starts with a noun.]

The areas of action to be addressed in this quarter are:

- improving service delivery
- enhancing the customer interface
- strengthening the product's visibility online. [Each item starts with a verb.]

Text that introduces the list

The text that introduces the list is known as the 'lead-in text'.

The lead-in text can be an incomplete sentence, with the bullets completing the sentence. For these lists, use a colon at the end of the lead-in text, lower case for the first word of each bullet point (except for proper nouns) and no punctuation at the end of each list item except for a full stop after the last item of the list:

The areas to be addressed in this quarter are:

- finances
- staffing
- profitability.

If the list items are full sentences, the lead-in text should also be a full sentence. For these lists, make the lead-in sentence a full sentence, and use a colon at the end to signal the bullet points to come. In this case, each bullet point should start with a capital letter and end with a full stop:

The outcomes of the project can be summarised by 3 main points:

- The main factors affecting risk of stroke in individuals with atrial fibrillation have been identified. There is concern over the expense of treating all such individuals with a single treatment regime.
- A method has been developed for evaluating those at greatest risk of stroke.
- A preliminary evaluation of 200 individuals has been completed.

If all items in the list start with the same word, you can either include that word in each item or move the word to the lead-in text:

We look at who the main groups of users are and at:

- their needs
- their expectations and understanding
- their behaviour.

or

We look at who the main groups of users are and at their:

- needs
- expectations and understanding
- behaviour.

Items in a list sometimes start with an introductory word or phrase that functions like a heading.

Use a spaced en dash after the introductory word or phrase, not another colon:

The policies are:

- feed-in tariffs – policies that offer long-term purchase agreements with power producers
- auctions – competitive bidding processes for renewable electricity
- tax incentives – policies involving tax incentives for installation of renewable energy.

not

The policies are:

- feed-in tariffs: policies that offer long-term purchase agreements with power producers
- auctions: competitive bidding processes for renewable electricity
- tax incentives: policies involving tax incentives for installation of renewable energy.

Order of items in a list

Lists can benefit from being ordered in a meaningful sequence.

The most important, relevant or well-known items are sometimes given first:

Well-known impressionist artists include:

- Monet
- Renoir
- Cézanne
- Degas
- Manet
- Bazille
- Morisot.

Alphabetical ordering makes it easy for readers to find specific items in the list:

The countries of Central America are:

- Belize
- Costa Rica
- El Salvador
- Guatemala
- Honduras
- Nicaragua
- Panama.

Specific criteria, such as quantitative ordering (largest to smallest, highest to lowest), may suit some contexts:

Countries in Central America with populations of more than 5 million in 2016 were:

- Guatemala (>16 million)
- Honduras (>9 million)
- El Salvador (>6 million)
- Nicaragua (>6 million).

Did you know? We haven't always used bullet lists. The first documented use of the word 'bullet' in this context was in 1950, when it was included in the *New York News type book* as a typographical device used to break up white space in advertising. The use of bullets slowly developed from there.

In 1960, bullets were defined in the *Oxford English dictionary* (OED) as 'small ornaments … primarily useful as type-breakers, story-starters, and story-enders'. An OED citation from 1971 indicates that editors had begun using 'various-sized dots or bullets at the beginning of a paragraph as a means of breaking up large gray masses of type'.

Bullets soon found a home in technical writing. For example, bullets became popular in NASA through the 1980s. Richard Feynman, in an article about the Challenger enquiry, mentions that 'This is how all information is communicated by NASA – by writing down everything behind little black circles, called bullets'.

However, general use was probably hampered by technical limitations. In 1982, Weiss's *The writing system for engineers and scientists* discussed the challenge of persuading typists to create bullets in a 2-step process: first typing lowercase o's and then filling them in with a pen (!).

When word processors and computers removed the typing challenges, bullets came into widespread use.

Source: Neeley KA & Alley M (2011). The humble history of the 'bullet'. In: *ASEE Annual Conference and Exposition, Conference Proceedings*, Canada.