

How to Write Bullet Lists: Do's and Don'ts

Do bulleted lists require the same punctuation? Should unordered bulleted lists contain some type of symbol? When do I use a Bullet List or a Numbered List? Do they all need periods?

One of the biggest problems for business and technical writers is how to present information so that the reader can find the right information without having to dig it out.

Write to be Scanned

Using bullet lists and numbered lists is a very effective way to present complex information.

Instead of burying the key points inside large blocks of text, pull out the significant parts so readers can see with a glance what the most important parts are.

Remember, on the web most of us scan for nuggets of useful content. We don't usually read word by word. We scan for information.

Once you grasp this, write your documents to reflect this.

Bullet vs. Numbered Lists

So, when do you use a Bullet list or a Number lists?

Knowing when to use, and when not to use, bullet, numbered or outline lists can prove difficult.

Before word processing came along, most publications displayed lists as either outline or numbered lists.

When to Use Numbered Lists

Use numbered lists when you're explaining instructions that need to be performed in sequence.

Numbered and unnumbered lists are most frequently used in academic and government publications. If numbers aren't essential use bullets, especially in business related documents.

When to Capitalize the First Letter in a Bulleted Item

In most cases, you can start each bulleted item with a capital letter. As we're taught in school to capitalize only proper nouns and the first word of a complete sentence, it may feel wrong to capitalize these single words and phrases.

Today it is generally accepted that you can capitalize the first word in bullet lists

When to Use Periods or Full Stops

1.) Use periods (also known as full stops) after independent clauses, dependent clauses, or long phrases that are displayed on separate lines in a list.

For example:

The software has the following features:

- Content Management features
- Dynamic Binding capabilities
- Autonomic programming add-ins.

2.) Use periods after short phrases that are essential for the completeness of the statement introducing the list.

For example:

[OpenOffice Writer] has a number of features, including:

- Indexing
- Master Pages
- HTML generation.

3.) You don't have to use periods after short phrases or single words in a list if the introductory statement is grammatically complete.

For example:

The houses in this price range have attractive features, such as:

- Large gardens
- Spacious rooms
- Central heating
- Garage

If you're creating a long document full of bulleted items, be consistent and decide at the start to end each item with, or without, a period. Within a grouping, always use all periods or no periods. **Avoid alternating throughout the document.**

How NOT to do it

The management suggests that you

- Arrive on Friday;
- Cook all the dishes, clean up, change your clothes; and
- Go back home once you've feed us all.

If you want to use the semicolons (;), delete the bullets and create a sentence.

Final Tip

Bullets serve a similar role to headlines. They highlight key points, are short, and are best with action verbs.

Bullets are not (necessarily) sentences.

If you want to write complete sentences, use a paragraph or numbered list.

Source:

Walsh, Ivan "How to Write Bullets: Do's & Don'ts"

Online article

Accessed on 01 March 2011

<http://www.klariti.com/business-writing/Guidelines-Bullet-Lists.shtml>

Guidelines for Bulleted Vertical Lists:

1. Introduce the list with a lead-in sentence (the lead-in need not be a complete sentence; the list items can complete the lead-in). Punctuate the lead-in sentence with a colon.
 2. Use bulleted lists when the list items are in no necessary order and when you want to emphasize the items in the list.
 3. Use asterisks or hyphens if you have no access to an actual bullet.
 4. Use sentence-style capitalization on list items.
 5. Begin run-over lines under the text of the list item, not the bullet; single space list items that are two to three lines long (but use double space for lengthy list items).
 6. Use regular double spacing between the surrounding text and the bulleted list; double space between list items.
 7. Indent the list items 3 to 5 spaces (start the bullet on the third or fifth column). Leave 1 space between the bullet and the start of the list item.
 8. Punctuate bulleted list items only if they are complete sentences or verb phrases that complete the sentence begun by the lead-in (and use periods in these two cases).
 9. Watch out for bulleted lists with more than 6 or 8 list items; for long bulleted lists, look for ways to subdivide or consolidate. Avoid single-item bulleted lists.
 10. When possible, omit articles (*a*, *an*, *the*) from the beginning of list items.
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Source:

McMurray, David A., "Online Technical Writing: Lists"
Online textbook
"Online Technical Writing: Online Textbook – Contents"
Accessed on 01 March 2011
<http://www.io.com/~hcexres/textbook/lists.html>