Simple but incredibly effective writing trick

By Christa Bedwin

This is going to be a short post, because this is a simple trick. It can **profoundly improve your message delivery,** whether you write long reports, punchy marketing materials, or e-mails that need speedy accurate answers.

Please read this paragraph. What do you learn?

When you dump all your thoughts down in the page, they might come out as a few six-line sentences. That's okay. As you get organized, go back and make sure that each sentence contains one easily digestible idea. Make sure the important ideas are at the front or back of paragraphs. Make sure that parallel ideas show up in bulleted lists, as appropriate, and that like ideas are grouped together.

How many things did I just ask you to do?

Look back and sort it out.

I wrote that paragraph that way, then I realized I could make that easier for you. Look at the following paragraph, delivering the exact same material. **How many things do I ask you to do?** You know before you even read it.

When you dump all your thoughts down in the page, they might come out as a few six-line sentences. That's okay. As you get organized, go back and make sure that:

- Each sentence contains one easily digestible idea.
- The important ideas are at the front or back of paragraphs.
- Parallel ideas show up in bulleted lists, as appropriate.
- Like ideas are grouped together.

This format: Fewer words to read, same info.

Bonus: Much faster scanning and comprehension for the reader.

Pro Tip: Surround all your most important ideas with white space. It's the best way to get them noticed.

Bulletted lists are like readability magic.

- They break up the space on the page in the middle of long reports, introducing white space and interest.
- They present information in a scannable way.
- The format signals the reader that important information lies there.
- Readers like them.

Go look at a long piece that you've just written and find a paragraph or two that you can turn into a bulletted list. You'll be glad that you did.

If you are having trouble finding where bulletted lists can help your writing be smoother, consider sending a few pages to someone like me to help you learn the skill.

Once you get the hang of this word-trimming device, your reports and other writing will be much better received by your readers and clients.

Questions? Please ask. ChristaBedwin@gmail.com.

A second question that I am often asked is, "**What is the right way to punctuate a bulletted list?**"

See the next page for a summary of good possibilities.

The best way(s) to punctuate bulleted lists

Bulleted lists are a fantastic way to present parallel information. Compared to straight paragraphs:

- They are many times faster to read.
- They are many times faster to understand.
- It is easier to remember the information presented in a list.
- They are very easy to locate when returning to the report.

There are two considerations that people use when they are trying to decide how to punctuate bulleted lists:

- readability considerations
- company policies and style guide

Frequently, the company policy is based on historical practice. Therefore, you will see many large corporations (including governments) that insist on a semi-colon after each point. Their logic will go something like this:

- that is how our founders did it;
- that is how it taught was in the style guide in their day; and
- if it was good enough for them, then it's good enough for us.

Modern readability research has taught us a few things that suggest changes to that old style, such as:

- People are able to read more quickly and easily if you remove the extra clutter.
- The bullet points are enough punctuation on their own, without a semi-colon on the end.
- People are able to process ideas most easily if they are delivered in complete sentences.

For lists of simpler concepts, don't use any punctuation at all. For example, this list is:

- simple
- naked
- readable

What about capitalization?

- Capitalize items that are full sentences.
- Do not capitalize items that are simple words or phrases.

Other things you should know about bulleted lists:

- Limit lists to 7 items. If you have a list longer than that, break it into two or more lists by better categorizing the items.

- If you will need to discuss items in a list with another party, consider numbering the list instead of just using bullets.

- You can get away with sentence fragments or "telegraph style" in a bulleted list in a way that you must not write the body of a report.

- If the list has an order (such as a procedure), use numbers instead of bullets.

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Questions? Please ask!! I love questions. Write to me at ChristaBedwin@gmail.com