

Writer's Edge

Welcome to Writer's Edge — a column by Ingrid Sapona, owner of Good with Words. In her column, Ingrid will write about ways of improving your communication skills. Many of you already know Ingrid — she's been working with the CICBV and CBVs for more than 10 years and is the creator and presenter of the popular seminar: Valuation Reports and Opinions: Your Stock In Trade — Are they as clear as can be?

Ingrid welcomes your feedback, questions, and suggestions for topics you'd be interested in reading about. Drop Ingrid a line at: ingrid@goodwithwords.com, or at 416-259-3399.

Crafting Bullet Lists

Bullet lists (sometimes called vertical lists) are common in business writing and are popular because they:

- are visually appealing;
- draw attention to particular information;
- reinforce relationships among ideas; and
- can help limit repetitious wording.

Poorly crafted bullet lists, however, can cause readers frustration and can create confusion.

Strictly speaking, vertical lists are not a grammatical construct. So, writers often do not give much thought to the particulars of how to properly draft them. Because I get asked about them all the time, I've come up with rules of thumb for structuring them and for punctuating them. In this column I'll talk about structuring vertical lists and in a future column I'll cover punctuating them.

Structuring a Vertical List

There are two components to bullet lists: the preamble and the bullet points. The preamble can be a single word, a phrase, or a full sentence. (The preamble in the bullet list above is: "... lists are popular because they".)

When read with the preamble, every bulleted item must form a full, grammatically correct sentence or phrase. To ensure this, test each bullet with the preamble and if an item doesn't work you must omit it from the list or modify the preamble. To test the preamble and bullets in the list above I read through each point like this:

...lists are popular because they are visually appealing...

...lists are popular because they draw attention...

...lists are popular because they reinforce relationships...

...lists are popular because they can help...

Regarding the bulleted items themselves, every item must be:

1. structured the same grammatically, and
2. related to the other items listed (in terms of content).

The two items above are similarly structured (both verbs ending in "ed" makes this obvious) and they both relate to the same thing.

Below is a poorly crafted bullet list. What's wrong with it structurally? How might you fix it?

Under the Market Approach, we analyze, among other things, whether the transaction:

- (a) was at arm's length;

- (b) was the result of a forced or distressed sale (or purchase);
- (c) was pursuant to the terms of a buy/sell agreement or put option; and
- (d) the market conditions at the time of the transaction were consistent with those at the valuation date with respect to the subject valuation.

The preamble (“whether the transaction”) works with (a) – (c), but not with (d). Re-writing the preamble wouldn’t help because the real problem is that (d) deals with market conditions while (a) – (c) relate to the transaction itself. To fix the list remove (d) and turn it into a freestanding sentence following the list (something like: We also looked at market conditions at the time of the transaction to ensure they were consistent...)

Writing a good bullet list can be challenging, but a well crafted one is a joy to read and a useful way of highlighting information.
