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## Essays in Editing

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### How should we punctuate lists?

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Different people suggest different methods for punctuating lists in academic text. In this paper I outline six different variations and discuss experts' preferences.

In my book on academic writing<sup>1</sup> I suggest, following Joshi,<sup>2</sup> that there are three possibilities for the typographic settings of lists: bullet points for items without any particular order; numbers for steps in a sequence; letters for mutually exclusive items.

I argue that it is best to use *bullets* when each point has an equal value, *numbers* when there is a definite order, and *letters* for mutually exclusive items. But nothing more is said about the punctuation of such lists.

In a review of my book, Badley points out, quite rightly, that I am inconsistent in how I punctuate the many different kinds of list scattered throughout the text.<sup>3</sup> The sub-components in my lists are variously followed by semicolons, full stops, or nothing at all.

Badley writes (p 47) that:

- bullet points may be punctuated with a semi-colon;
- bullet points may be punctuated with a full stop.
- bullet points already have their punctuation mark up-front and need no other
- but shouldn't bullet points which are questions have their own question mark?

Presumably the same points may be said of lists preceded by numbers and/or by letters (although lettered lists seem rare these days).

In this paper I examine some different ways of presenting such lists. First of all I turn to various publication manuals for their advice. I keep to bulleted lists – although the advice is much the same for enumerated or alphabetized lists. I then present six examples to illustrate how such lists would look when they follow the different rules expressed by others. Finally, I present the results of a small study of experts' preferences for some of the variations presented here.

#### Advice from publication manuals and style guides

The American Psychological Association's (2001) *Publication Manual* is non-committal on this point.<sup>4</sup> It uses bullet-point lists that:

- are punctuated with a comma (p 7)
- are punctuated with a semi-colon (p 14)
- are complete sentences, with an opening capital letter and a closing question mark or full stop (p 29).

Ritter's *Oxford Guide to Style*<sup>5</sup> recommends:

- Do not capitalize the first letter of items in lists unless each element in the list forms a complete and separate sentence (p 72).

- End such complete entries with a full stop (p 205).
- Use capital letters for each entry and no full stop when the items in the list are not full sentences (p 206).

Kirkham's *Full Marks: Advice on Punctuation for Scientific and Technical Writing*<sup>6</sup> recommends no initial capital letters, intermediate semicolons, and a final full stop (p 33). So lists are punctuated thus:

The principal additions to the keyboard are:

- a transmission key;
- five cursor-control keys;
- an Operator's Guide.

But Kirkham also includes examples (p 35) where list items that are incomplete sentences start with a capital letter and end with a full stop.

The Modern Humanities Research Association's *Style Guide*<sup>7</sup> recommends that list entries start with a capital letter, but have no end punctuation marks, except the last item. The following illustration shows an example (p 10).

Text to be set in a particular font should be marked (manually if necessary) as follows:

- Italic text to be underlined once
- Small capitals to be underlined twice
- Capitals to be typed in capitals, or typed in lower case and underlined three times
- Italic capitals to be typed as capitals and underlined once.

This particular style, of course, is the default style for Microsoft Word (apart from the final stop), and it can be seen regularly displayed in Microsoft PowerPoint slides.

The *Chicago Manual of Style*<sup>8</sup> has 15 sections on the punctuation of lists. It suggests primarily that full stops should be omitted after all the items in a vertical list, unless one or more of the items are complete sentences (p 160), and that if the vertical list completes a sentence begun in the introductory element, then the final full stop should be omitted, unless the items in the list are separated by commas or semicolons (p 160).

Thus it seems that primarily two kinds of lists are being discussed – one where each item is a complete sentence, and one where each item is a sub-component of a sentence (as in most of the examples above). However, the range of recommended punctuation styles is much the same for both forms of list.

#### Examples

I now present a set of six (fictitious) examples. Of course, many more versions are possible.

**Version 1**

Here is how we proceed:

- melt the butter in a large glass bowl for one minute on High
- add the stock and the seasoning
- add the flour and return to the mixture to the oven
- cook for 20 minutes on High

**Version 2**

Here is how we proceed:

- Melt the butter in a large glass bowl for one minute on High
- Add the stock and the seasoning
- Add the flour and return the mixture to the oven
- Cook for 20 minutes on High

**Version 3**

Here is how we proceed:

- melt the butter in a large glass bowl for one minute on High;
- add the stock and the seasoning;
- add the flour and return the mixture to the oven; and
- cook for 20 minutes on High.

**Version 4**

Here is how we proceed:

- Melt the butter in a large glass bowl for one minute on High;
- Add the stock and the seasoning;
- Add the flour and return the mixture to the oven; and
- Cook for 20 minutes on High.

**Version 5**

Here is how we proceed:

- melt the butter in a large glass bowl for one minute on High.
- add the stock and the seasoning.
- add the flour and return the mixture to the oven.
- cook for 20 minutes on High.

**Version 6**

Here is how we proceed:

- Melt the butter in a large glass bowl for one minute on High.
- Add the stock and the seasoning.
- Add the flour and return the mixture to the oven.
- Cook for 20 minutes on High.

**Preferences**

What do readers think about these (and other) settings? Which one do they prefer? Do copy editors have differing views? To collect some data on these issues I asked various well-known copy editors and colleagues to express their preferences for various versions of the lists displayed above (and several other variations). The responses fell into two main groups.

The first group could not be bothered. Peter Elbow, for instance, wrote: "I looked at this and I'm afraid my eyes glazed over. I really don't have any feelings about that level of detail – except for the feeling that I wish people didn't care." Another colleague, Paul Stiff, wrote: "My first reaction is to say that I don't care, but that's not true, as I make decisions about this kind of thing when I edit and copy-edit other people's texts, and doubtless have inclinations, if inconsistently, when I do my own writing."

The second group discussed the pros and cons of the various settings. Moira Johnson-Vekony said, "Lists are the bugbear of editing. To go through your settings one by one...". Vivienne Mawson wrote, "Ah, the dreaded inconsistency! First I would drop every semicolon, comma, and full stop." Yateendra Joshi raised questions about other forms of list, different spatial settings, and indentation, as well as suggesting that the penultimate item in a list should usually end with the link "and" – a recommendation that others explicitly rejected. Mary Ellen Kerans, for instance, wrote about a different list: "The 'and' before the last item should be dropped."

Most people in this second group either commented first on the various styles presented to them for comparison purposes and then indicated that they preferred Version 1, or they stated outright that they preferred Version 1.

**Conclusions**

Different people will no doubt have different preferences for the typographic settings of lists in academic texts – although some may not notice and some may not care. Some versions listed above (Versions 4, 5, and 6) are seen as ungrammatical and are thus disliked. Other readers will prefer the neatness of Version 1. A lot seems to depend upon the length and the style of the sub-components in the list. Whatever the case, we might all agree that it is important to be consistent within a single text.

**References**

- 1 Hartley J. *Academic writing and publishing: a practical handbook*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.
- 2 Joshi Y. *Communicating in style*. Delhi: The Energy & Resources Institute, 2003.
- 3 Badley G. How to write a book review. *PsyPag Quarterly* 2008(69):45-48.
- 4 American Psychological Association. *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association*. 5th ed. Washington, DC: APA, 2001.
- 5 Ritter RM. *The Oxford guide to style*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- 6 Kirkham J. *Full marks: advice on punctuation for scientific and technical writing*. 2nd ed. Marlborough: Ramsbury Books, 1993.
- 7 Modern Humanities Research Association. *MHRA style guide: a handbook for authors, editors, and writers of theses*. London: MHRA, 2008.
- 8 *Chicago manual of style*. 14th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.