Turn Any Series into a Bulleted or Numbered List
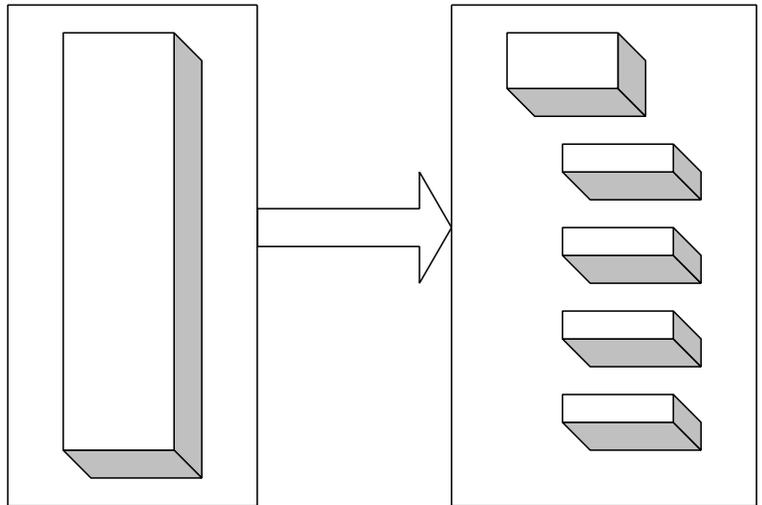
Let people skim

Breaking out a list allows people to skim through it quickly, skipping past the items they aren't interested in and spotting the one item worth reading.

By setting off these items in their own short paragraphs, preceded by some kind of dingbat (arrows, checkmarks, circles, pointing hands, or numbers), you show the user that:

- These items are all similar in some way.
- Each item is distinct.

The visual layout lets people "get" what the items have in common and skim for a specific item without having to read the irrelevant ones. That's true, to a degree, on paper. But when you move material onto the screen, you should turn any series into a bulleted or numbered list, to save users' time.

Boldface the lead-ins or headings in the list

If you have a sentence or two about every product in a series, make the list out of the product names in bold and then insert the descriptions in regular text, indented, so they are clearly subordinate (and can be skipped past).

> One format that works well on-screen is lists of **short**, **bold headings**, a few words long, followed by a sentence or two of summary in a lighter, perhaps smaller, font. (Bricklin, 1998)

The bolded items can be on their own lines, as individual paragraphs or as boldface text leading into the rest of the explanations.

Good fit: a list of shortcuts to popular areas on your site, best-selling items, or important links.

If you have a long list...

To help people scan quickly past large chunks they don't care about, turn a long list into several groups, each with its own subhead.

How many items are too many? No one knows. But, depending on your situation, you might set a limit of nine items per group, in no more than two levels—primary and secondary (Sun, 2000). That way, people can usually see most of the group within one screen, and can compare all the items without having to scroll around.

Usually, you are creating a list because you want to allow people to compare the items in some way. So make sure that people can see at least three or four items at the same time.

> Strike a balance between the number of items users can view simultaneously and the amount of information you provide for each item. (IBM, 1999)

No need to be absolute about these numbers, though; for example, if guests know in advance they are going to get a list of a hundred items in alphabetical order, they can handle the volume, because they understand the organizing principle.

Put the longest item last

If you can, put the longest item at the end of the list, so it does not interfere with reading the others.

EXAMPLES

Before

A bridge connects two local area networks (LANs). The bridge physically joins separate LAN segments, such as two Ethernet cables. We offer four main types of bridges: transparent, encapsulating, translating, and source routing.

After

A bridge connects two local area networks (LANs). The bridge physically joins separate LAN segments, such as two Ethernet cables. We offer four main types of bridges:

- Transparent
- Encapsulating
- Translating
- Source routing

Before

New in this release are additional items of information about each song, such as encoding options, handheld devices that play these formats, genre, total length of the track, name of the original album the track belonged to, and a summary of any preferences you set in your download profile.

After

New in this release are additional items of information about each song:

- Encoding options
- Handheld devices that play these formats
- Genre
- Total length of the track
- Name of the original album the track belonged to
- A summary of any preferences you set in your download profile

AUDIENCE FIT

If visitors want this...	How well does this guideline apply?
TO HAVE FUN	Lists work well for choices, but if someone just wants to roll through your torrential prose, soaking it up all in one breath, forget the bullets.
TO LEARN	Very helpful as an organizing device, showing that the items all belong together, as a sequence or collection.
TO ACT	Numbered steps increase the effectiveness of any instructions. (Only use bullets for actions that are optional.)
TO BE AWARE	Rarely used in this field, so some users may find lists uncongenial, with overtones of business and technical writing. But, hey, they can get over it.
TO GET CLOSE TO PEOPLE	Probably a bit too formal for messages on your discussion list, but very helpful in e-mails, because the lists overcome the lack of visual structure afforded by ASCII text.

See: Bricklin (1998), Brusaw, et al (1997), Bush and Campbell (1995), Hackos & Stevens (1996), IBM (1999), Kaiser (2000), Kilian (1999), Lohse & Spiller (1998), Morkes & Nielsen (1997, 1998), Nielsen (1997a, 1997b, 1999d), Price & Korman (1993), Sun (2000), Tarutz (1992).

For your review only.

Excerpt from *Hot Text: Web Writing that Works*.
(New Riders).