



The Friendly Editor

“The Friendly Editor” welcomes letters from others interested in language. Please write to Don Bush, 6609 Hillgrove Drive, San Diego, CA 92120.

DON BUSH, COLUMN EDITOR

Editing Effective Lists

BY DON BUSH, Fellow, San Diego Chapter

Back in the 18th century, it was not uncommon to see sentences of 100 words or more. These marathon expressions were divided not only by commas and semicolons but also by colons (used in those days to separate protracted clauses that might each already contain several dividing semicolons).

Closer to our own day, teachers have advocated “sentence variety.” Speaking at the 1965 annual conference of STC (then STWP), Henry E. Francis of C. F. Braun Co. said that “the easiest reading was sentences of variable lengths from one to forty words.” He reasoned aloud that “anything over forty often gets cumbersome and anything under one can be vague.”

Nowadays, in the user manuals of the 21st century, it’s rare to find a sentence as long as forty words. This is the age of chunking. We frequently employ sentence fragments. We may also hastily replace the venerable colon and semicolon with the slash or the dash (although not if we claim to be meticulous writers).

As part of this trimming trend, we streamline our sentences and paragraphs into lists. Lists seem clearer. They have a lucid openness, particularly on a computer screen. They not only take up less space, but they require less time to develop. As a result, today’s literature of user manuals is recorded almost entirely in lists (sometimes elegantly stylized as *listings*).

Lists are indeed easy to compile, particularly for engineering writers. But beware: Lists often turn out to be cryptic. Directions like “1. Install” or “2. Files are

copied” may not transmit sufficient information. Also, lists may lack adequate continuity or may cram difficult explanations into an overcrowded space.

We editors often must help authors tailor lists so they speak with a single voice and resolve into an effective, unified message. There are several techniques to help us do this.

Observing Parallelism

The first technique is obvious: Observe parallelism. Parallelism is fundamental to any kind of writing. But the method is difficult to explain to students (except for electrical engineering majors, who seem to have no trouble, perhaps because they know about parallel vs. series circuits).

Elements are parallel when they stand side by side, address the same topic, and have the same grammatical form. In the 1962 U.S. Treasury Department publication *Effective Revenue Writing*, Calvin D. Linton says eloquently, “Parallelism is like a comb drawn through tangled locks. Paragraphs that look hopeless can be transformed into neat separate strands by drawing through them the ordering comb of parallelism. Parallelism is basic, for it builds rhythm, and rhythm is basic; it demands order, and order is another word for reason.”

Linton quotes Owen Feltham’s *Resolves*, published in 1628, which warned, “A combed writing will cost both sweat and a rubbing of the brain. And combed I wish it, not frizzled nor curled.” Lists need combing. If a list mixes action verbs and

simple statements, or phrases and complete sentences, or imperative and declarative sentences, it becomes frizzled.

We in STC do a pretty good job of combing our copy. But editors must be alert to authors’ nouns that spring from radically different milieus and therefore violate parallelism (e.g., 1. *Linking*, 2. *Personality*, 3. *Web Sites*). The same problem applies to verb forms that point in different directions (e.g., 1. *Update...* 2. *Be prepared to...* 3. *Continuing...*). Passive verbs can be especially treacherous.

Here’s a tip: Use gerunds (*-ing* nouns) for uniting disparate elements smoothly. (e.g., 1. *Updating...* 2. *Changing...* 3. *Grouping...*).

Grouping the Items

Long lists are easier to comprehend at first reading when they are separated into groups. If three or four items stem from the same topic, bundle them together; in this way, ten items might be grouped logically into sub-lists of three, three, and four, saving readers from having to mentally skip around as they read straight down the row.

You might consider giving each group a separate heading. In proposals, engineers may eagerly create “salesy” summaries of twenty-five benefits in a breathless, uninterrupted sequence. Those same benefits seem far more powerful if they are neatly segregated and explained under *Performance*, *Life-Cycle Cost*, *Program Management*, etc.

Segregation also helps avoid another recurrent problem: faulty organization. Be

sure to construct an organized hierarchy that contains symmetrical branches, not just a string of random thoughts. Strong organization by the writer can guide the very thought of the reader.

Keeping Lists Short

Studies have shown that, in a list, the items that get the most attention are at the start and at the end. Keep this fact in mind when helping the author emphasize salient points.

A corollary is to keep lists short. This trick is especially pertinent if you want the listed items to be remembered. Recalling five items is certainly easier than recalling ten, and recalling only two is easier still.

Telling the Story

A list is much like many other types of writing: The author is trying to tell a story. An editor can deftly use sequence for narrative effect. You can start with a bang or, conversely, build gradually to a climax. Either method is more effective than an intermittent mixture. With simple juxtapositions, an editor can gently lead the reader from topic to topic and develop a logical schema. Such planning is needed far more in a user manual than in something that you hastily scribble down to take along to the supermarket.

The editor not only can arrange the sequence of items, but can also supply continuity to hold them together. Try inserting into your lists our trusty old friends *however*, *therefore*, or even *accordingly*. Such words add humanity to the writing and forge a link between author and reader.

Entering the Age of Linking

To repeat, this is the age of chunking. Accordingly, it must also be the age of linking. Somebody has to tie together all the disparate fragments generated by chunky, computerized writing. Such linking is seldom done by programmers, and it never can be done solely by *FrameMaker*.

Therefore, making a list into an effective message is often the province of the last person to see the copy ahead of the user. This valuable person is the ultimate reader's advocate: a competent editor. ❶

Beyond the Bleeding Edge

(Continued from page 39)

Column Updates

One risk of discussing bleeding-edge technologies is that the players change unexpectedly. Because of that, I'll include an "update" section in these columns when necessary.

Several people inquired about the child-tracking services from Prodigious that I described in the column on location-based wireless Web applications (*Intercom*, June 2000). The company seems to have gone out of business. (You can still find links to the company's Web site, but they don't work.) Two suggestions if you're looking for this type of service:

- On the Web, search for "Prodigious" (the results may suggest other

search terms), "GPS," and "child-tracking."

- Contact the security office at a large amusement park, like one of the Six Flags chains, and ask about such software. ❶

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