

Vertical Lists, Bullets

Q. What are the proper guidelines for punctuating the phrases/clauses in a bulleted list?

A. Many people have been asking us about how to punctuate vertical lists—numbered, unnumbered, and bulleted. Do you capitalize the first letter of each new item? What about terminal punctuation? Periods? Semicolons? Commas? The following list will, I hope, answer these questions:

1. Vertical lists are best introduced by a grammatically complete sentence (i.e., a sentence that is still a sentence all by itself, without the help of the list), like the one above, followed by a colon.
2. No periods are required at the end of entries unless at least one entry is a complete sentence, in which case a period is necessary at the end of each entry.
3. Items in a list should be syntactically similar.
4. If items are numbered, as they are in this example, a period follows each number, and each entry begins with a capital letter—whether or not the entry forms a complete sentence.
5. Bulleted lists are considered appropriate mainly for instructional or promotional material and are treated the same as numbered lists in terms of capitalization and punctuation.
6. A group of unnumbered items each of which consists of an incomplete sentence should begin lowercase and requires no terminal punctuation.
7. If a list completes the sentence that introduces it, items begin with lowercase letters, commas or semicolons are used to separate each item, and the last item ends with a period; such lists are often better run into the text rather than presented vertically.

That's Chicago style, in any case. I think this style demonstrates a marriage between the principles of consistency and grammatical integrity—and in this marriage there are some compromises. If you are dissatisfied with a list after applying these principles, consider rewriting the list or scrapping the list format altogether. Vertical lists are usually introduced to highlight and clarify a principle; any awkwardness can destroy their *raison d'être*.

For examples, please see paragraphs 5.9, 5.10, 5.61, 5.101, 8.75, 8.76, 8.77, 8.78, and 8.79 of *CMS*.

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