CHAPTER 9
LISTS AND TABLES

There is no single standard for writing a list. The style of each list depends on the contents of the list, but the style should remain consistent within each list.

There are, broadly, three different types of lists: the ordered list, the itemized list, and the variable list. When a reader must follow the items in a list sequentially, use an ordered list. If sequence is not important, use an itemized list. When defining a list of terms, use the variable list.

Stems

Avoid using bullet point lists to format a single sentence. Some translation tools, for example Zanata, display list items and the introductory sentence (or *sentence stem*) as individual sentences for translation. If these are not complete sentences, they are difficult to translate.

Example	Improvement
Before you start the installation, make sure you have • enough free storage on your system • backed up any data that you want to keep to ensure a smooth installation.	Before you start the installation, follow these steps to ensure a smooth installation: • Ensure you have enough free storage on your system. • Back up any data that you want to keep.

Punctuation

If you place a period at the end of one list item in a list, then use a period at the end of each list item in that list.

Use punctuation when a list item completes an introductory sentence.

Before removing your USB hard drive from your computer, you may need to:

- close any open files located on the drive.

- close any terminal open to a directory on the drive.

Use punctuation when a list item contains more than one complete sentence.

Before removing your USB hard drive from your computer, there are two tasks you may need to take.

- If you are running an application with a files from the drive open, you must close the file. Alternately, save a new copy of the file to some other location. If you are not sure whether you have any files from the drive open, use the **lsof** command.

- If you have a terminal open to a directory on the drive, either close the terminal or change directory to a directory not located on the drive.

Do not use punctuation for:

- sentence fragments

- single words or short terms

Most of all, strive for consistency. If a list contains two list items that are complete sentences, and a third that is just a single word, you should restructure your list. For example, change the single word list item into a simple sentence so that it matches the other items. Alternately, review whether the items in your list belong in a list together.

Tense

Retain the same verb tense for each list item.

For example, this is incorrect:

- Students gain an understanding of the Linux init system.

- All students will learn how to use **systemctl**.

- Students create a simple chroot for testing.

The second list item uses the future tense, while the other two are present tense.

This is correct:

- Gain an understanding of the Linux init system.

- Learn how to use the **systemctl** command to start, stop, and monitor services.

- Create a simple chroot for testing.

This is called *parallelism*, and should be applied across all lists within the same book.

A list that constantly changes sentence structure is confusing:

- Use to specify the X variable.

- Specifies which value to apply to Y.

- You can use this to change the config from a POSIX shell.

It is easier to understand when a list maintains the same voice throughout. A reader might refer to several lists or tables within a book, so ensuring a consistent voice in every list or table helps readers quickly parse important information.

Key-Value Lists

If you are writing a list that exists only to define terms, use a variable list.

example.com
    A domain reserved as a safe example URL. This is the correct way to define a term in a list.

example.local
    A domain that exists only within a local network.

cat
    The concatenate command.

Sometimes your list definitions do not contain exclusively simple terms to be defined, so you have to use an itemized list to allow for mixed list items. Delimiters separating a term from its definition can be confused as being a part of the term, so it is best to define terms in complete sentences, and with appropriate Docbook tags.

- example.com is a domain reserved as a safe example URL. This is the correct way to define a term in a list.

- example.local: a domain that exists only within a local network. This is not as clean, since the colon (:) could be interpreted as part of the term being defined.

- **cat** - the concatenate command. This is also unclear, since the dash (-) could represent shorthand for POSIX `stdin`.

Tables

Tables are, essentially, lists rendered horizontally as well as vertically.

The same rules apply for tables as for lists, with the primary goal being internal consistency. This table is not consistent:

Server	OS	Function
servera	RHEL 7	DNS
serverb	RHEL 7	DNS fallback
serverc	Fedora 26	This is only a testing server.

This is a consistent table:

Server	OS	Function
servera	RHEL 7	DNS
serverb	RHEL 7	DNS fallback
serverc	Fedora 26	This is only a testing server

Even though the final entry in the table is a complete sentence, it has no period at the end of the sentence to better match the convention established by previous entries.