# Bullet‑Point Structure Best Practices in Business Communications

## Scope and Objectives

This report explains when to use bulleted or numbered lists versus short paragraphs in professional communications, how to position the *ask* relative to the value proposition, and provides guidelines, dos and don’ts, and sample layouts. Insights come from business writing guides, research on reader behavior and email marketing studies.

## When to Use Bulleted Lists vs. Short Paragraphs

### Bulleted and Numbered Lists

Bulleted and numbered lists increase visual appeal and skim value, draw attention to specific information and illustrate relationships among ideas[[1]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Bulleted%2FNumbered%20Lists%20Bulleted%20and%20numbered,tips%20for%20using%20lists%20effectively). The University of Oregon’s *Business Writing Guide* suggests the following best practices[[2]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf):

1. **Lead with a complete sentence:** Introduce the list with a sentence that logically and grammatically sets up the items[[3]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=1,Similar).
2. **Parallel structure:** Word each point in similar grammatical form (e.g., all noun phrases or all verb phrases)[[4]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=phrasing%20helps%20readers%20easily%20see,a%20verb%20phrase).
3. **Limit the number of items:** Include at least two items, but generally no more than seven to respect readers’ attention spans[[5]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=3,to%20accommodate%20readers%E2%80%99%20attention%20spans).
4. **Keep items concise:** Limit each bullet to two lines of text for readability[[6]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=4,two%20lines%20of%20text%20maximum).
5. **Use simple symbols:** Prefer plain bullets or numbers over decorative icons to maintain a clean appearance[[7]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=5,than%20dashes%2C%20arrows%2C%20or%20Roman).

Maura Thomas notes that bulleted lists are ideal for information that doesn’t require a response; they create white space and help readers digest information quickly[[8]](https://www.maurathomas.com/business-email-writing-tips/#:~:text=Bullet%20points%20are%20great%20for,are%20more%20effective%20than%20paragraphs). However, if you expect answers to specific points, switch to numbered lists so recipients can easily reference each item[[9]](https://www.maurathomas.com/business-email-writing-tips/#:~:text=When%20to%20Use%20Numbered%20Lists,for%20Effective%20Business%20Emails).

**When to choose a list:**

* You need to draw attention to multiple benefits or features.
* The message contains more than three separate items[[10]](https://www.writingclearscience.com.au/bullet-point-lists-versus-paragraphs/#:~:text=1,sentences).
* Sentences are long or complex; breaking them into bullet points improves readability[[10]](https://www.writingclearscience.com.au/bullet-point-lists-versus-paragraphs/#:~:text=1,sentences).
* You want to create white space to reduce visual fatigue[[11]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Empty%20space%20decreases%20visual%20fatigue,off).

### Short Paragraphs

Business communications often use short block paragraphs—each focusing on one main idea and limited to six lines of text in shorter pieces[[12]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Keeping%20paragraphs%20brief%20is%20also,in%20longer%20proposals%20and%20reports). Paragraphs are preferable when:

* Ideas flow better as continuous prose rather than discrete points.
* There are fewer than three items to convey[[10]](https://www.writingclearscience.com.au/bullet-point-lists-versus-paragraphs/#:~:text=1,sentences).
* You need to explain context or provide narrative.
* Using too many lists would overwhelm the reader[[13]](https://www.writingclearscience.com.au/bullet-point-lists-versus-paragraphs/#:~:text=,consider%20using%20a%20table%20instead).

Paragraphs should be separated by a blank line (not indented) to create white space[[14]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Short%20Block%20Paragraphs%20Business%20writing,the%20shift%20between%20key%20ideas). Avoid unbroken blocks of text; they resemble a word‑search puzzle and strain the reader’s eyes[[15]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Imagine%20reading%20a%20document%20filled,to%20quickly%20learn%20new%20material).

### Lists vs. Paragraphs at a Glance

| Format | Best Use | Key Guidelines | Source |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Bulleted list** | Highlight non‑sequential ideas or benefits; improve skim value | Lead with a complete sentence; use parallel structure; include 2–7 items; keep each item short; use simple bullets[[16]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=1,than%20dashes%2C%20arrows%2C%20or%20Roman) | Business Writing Guide |
| **Numbered list** | Request responses to multiple points or outline steps in a sequence[[9]](https://www.maurathomas.com/business-email-writing-tips/#:~:text=When%20to%20Use%20Numbered%20Lists,for%20Effective%20Business%20Emails) | Same as bulleted list, but numbering helps recipients refer to specific items[[17]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=1,to%20accommodate%20readers%E2%80%99%20attention%20spans) | Maura Thomas |
| **Short paragraph** | Provide context, narrative or a small number of points | Limit paragraphs to one idea and six lines[[12]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Keeping%20paragraphs%20brief%20is%20also,in%20longer%20proposals%20and%20reports); separate with blank lines[[14]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Short%20Block%20Paragraphs%20Business%20writing,the%20shift%20between%20key%20ideas) | Business Writing Guide |

## Positioning the Ask versus the Value Proposition

### Structuring for Persuasion

The **AIDA** framework—Attention, Interest, Desire and Action—suggests that you first capture the reader’s attention, build interest, create desire by emphasizing benefits, and finally prompt action[[18]](https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/management/aida-model-marketing/#:~:text=,the%20potential%20customer%E2%80%99s%20interest%20level). Applying this to email structure means presenting the value proposition (what the recipient gains) before making an ask.

Expandi’s outreach playbook advises a natural progression: **hook → personalization → value proposition → case study → call to action**[[19]](https://expandi.io/blog/email-marketing-call-to-action/#:~:text=4,them). By demonstrating value first, your request feels earned rather than abrupt. The *Better Creative* design blog provides empirical support: relocating a mid‑email call to action (CTA) to the top while emphasizing the value proposition increased click‑through rates by **15 %**[[20]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=CTA%20at%20the%20Email%27s%20Top%3A,Direct%20Engagement%20Potential), and adding a distinct CTA near the top with clear verbiage boosted CTR by **340 %**[[21]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=A%20clear%2C%20standout%20CTA%20is,positioning%20can%20amplify%20its%20impact). However, they also caution that top‑placed CTAs can feel too direct if context or rapport is lacking[[22]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=CTA%20at%20the%20Email%27s%20Top%3A,Direct%20Engagement%20Potential).

### Best Practices

• **Introduce benefits before the ask:** Follow the AIDA sequence—start with an attention‑grabbing statement, describe the problem or opportunity, highlight benefits, and only then present the request or CTA[[18]](https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/management/aida-model-marketing/#:~:text=,the%20potential%20customer%E2%80%99s%20interest%20level).

• **Ensure context:** If you place a CTA near the top, briefly summarize the value proposition first to avoid appearing pushy[[22]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=CTA%20at%20the%20Email%27s%20Top%3A,Direct%20Engagement%20Potential).

• **Use one primary CTA:** Multiple CTAs can dilute your message. The *Better Creative* case study found that minimizing CTAs and highlighting only the most essential action increased CTR by 43 %[[23]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=While%20CTAs%20offer%20opportunities%20for,resonates%20best%20with%20your%20audience).

• **Personalize your ask:** Connect the CTA to the recipient’s pain point or goal. Personalized messages yield higher engagement[[24]](https://www.klenty.com/blog/subject-lines-personalization-statistics/#:~:text=We%20found%20that%20emails%20with,get%20opened%20by%20the%20prospects).

### Sample Layouts

**Layout A: Informational Email with Ask**

1. **Opening/Hook** – one sentence summarizing why you’re writing.
2. **Value Proposition Paragraph** – 2–3 sentences explaining the benefit to the reader (e.g., time saved, revenue gained).
3. **Bulleted List of Key Benefits** – highlight up to five advantages with concise bullets[[16]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=1,than%20dashes%2C%20arrows%2C%20or%20Roman).
4. **CTA Sentence** – clearly state the requested action (schedule a demo, reply with questions). Place this after the benefits.
5. **Optional P.S.** – reinforce urgency or offer a secondary benefit.

**Layout B: Request for Multiple Inputs**

1. **Introduction Paragraph** – set context and explain why you need input.
2. **Numbered List of Questions or Tasks** – ask recipients to respond to each item; numbering allows easy reference[[9]](https://www.maurathomas.com/business-email-writing-tips/#:~:text=When%20to%20Use%20Numbered%20Lists,for%20Effective%20Business%20Emails).
3. **Closing Paragraph** – thank the reader and indicate the deadline or next step.

## Guidelines, Dos and Don’ts

### Dos

| Guideline | Rationale |
| --- | --- |
| **Use a lead sentence before lists** | Sets up the list grammatically and clarifies its purpose[[3]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=1,Similar). |
| **Keep lists short and parallel** | Parallel phrasing helps readers see connections[[4]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=phrasing%20helps%20readers%20easily%20see,a%20verb%20phrase); short bullets improve skim value[[6]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=4,two%20lines%20of%20text%20maximum). |
| **Limit list items to seven or fewer** | Honors attention spans[[5]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=3,to%20accommodate%20readers%E2%80%99%20attention%20spans) and prevents information overload. |
| **Use numbered lists when you need responses** | Enables recipients to reference specific items in replies[[9]](https://www.maurathomas.com/business-email-writing-tips/#:~:text=When%20to%20Use%20Numbered%20Lists,for%20Effective%20Business%20Emails). |
| **Follow AIDA: benefits before ask** | Builds desire and makes the request feel earned[[18]](https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/management/aida-model-marketing/#:~:text=,the%20potential%20customer%E2%80%99s%20interest%20level). |
| **Test CTA placement** | Mid‑email or concluding CTAs align with content flow but may be overlooked; top CTAs can boost clicks if context is clear[[25]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=CTA%20at%20the%20Email%27s%20Top%3A,Direct%20Engagement%20Potential). |

### Don’ts

| Don’t | Reason |
| --- | --- |
| **Don’t overuse bullet lists** | Too many lists can make the document hard to read and dilute their impact[[13]](https://www.writingclearscience.com.au/bullet-point-lists-versus-paragraphs/#:~:text=,consider%20using%20a%20table%20instead). |
| **Don’t use one‑item lists** | A single bullet is visually awkward; rewrite it as a sentence. |
| **Don’t bury the ask in the middle of dense text** | Readers may miss it; separate the CTA and make it prominent. |
| **Don’t request action before explaining benefits** | Asking too early can feel pushy and reduce response rates. |
| **Don’t use decorative bullets or inconsistent symbols** | Fancy icons can distract and make the list look unprofessional[[7]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=5,than%20dashes%2C%20arrows%2C%20or%20Roman). |
| **Don’t cram multiple CTAs** | Multiple requests dilute focus; prioritizing one action improves clarity[[23]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=While%20CTAs%20offer%20opportunities%20for,resonates%20best%20with%20your%20audience). |

## Key Takeaways

1. **Lists improve readability but require discipline.** Use bulleted or numbered lists when highlighting multiple points or requesting responses. Lead with a complete sentence, keep items parallel and concise, and limit each list to seven items[[16]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=1,than%20dashes%2C%20arrows%2C%20or%20Roman).
2. **Short paragraphs support flow and narrative.** Limit paragraphs to one idea and about six lines[[12]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Keeping%20paragraphs%20brief%20is%20also,in%20longer%20proposals%20and%20reports), and separate them with blank lines for white space[[14]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Short%20Block%20Paragraphs%20Business%20writing,the%20shift%20between%20key%20ideas).
3. **Value before ask.** Following the AIDA model—attention, interest, desire, action—ensures that you communicate the benefits before asking for a response[[18]](https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/management/aida-model-marketing/#:~:text=,the%20potential%20customer%E2%80%99s%20interest%20level). Top‑placed CTAs can boost clicks if paired with clear value[[20]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=CTA%20at%20the%20Email%27s%20Top%3A,Direct%20Engagement%20Potential); otherwise, position the CTA after establishing context.
4. **Test and refine.** Different audiences respond to different structures. Experiment with CTA placement, list length and formatting to find what resonates, and personalize wherever possible[[24]](https://www.klenty.com/blog/subject-lines-personalization-statistics/#:~:text=We%20found%20that%20emails%20with,get%20opened%20by%20the%20prospects).

[[1]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf" \l ":~:text=Bulleted%2FNumbered%20Lists%20Bulleted%20and%20numbered,tips%20for%20using%20lists%20effectively) [[2]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf) [[3]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=1,Similar) [[4]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=phrasing%20helps%20readers%20easily%20see,a%20verb%20phrase) [[5]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=3,to%20accommodate%20readers%E2%80%99%20attention%20spans) [[6]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=4,two%20lines%20of%20text%20maximum) [[7]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=5,than%20dashes%2C%20arrows%2C%20or%20Roman) [[11]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Empty%20space%20decreases%20visual%20fatigue,off) [[12]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Keeping%20paragraphs%20brief%20is%20also,in%20longer%20proposals%20and%20reports) [[14]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Short%20Block%20Paragraphs%20Business%20writing,the%20shift%20between%20key%20ideas) [[15]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=Imagine%20reading%20a%20document%20filled,to%20quickly%20learn%20new%20material) [[16]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=1,than%20dashes%2C%20arrows%2C%20or%20Roman) [[17]](https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf#:~:text=1,to%20accommodate%20readers%E2%80%99%20attention%20spans) business-writing-guide.pdf

<https://business.uoregon.edu/sites/default/files/2024-10/business-writing-guide.pdf>

[[8]](https://www.maurathomas.com/business-email-writing-tips/#:~:text=Bullet%20points%20are%20great%20for,are%20more%20effective%20than%20paragraphs) [[9]](https://www.maurathomas.com/business-email-writing-tips/#:~:text=When%20to%20Use%20Numbered%20Lists,for%20Effective%20Business%20Emails) Business Email Writing Tips That Work Like Magic

<https://www.maurathomas.com/business-email-writing-tips/>

[[10]](https://www.writingclearscience.com.au/bullet-point-lists-versus-paragraphs/#:~:text=1,sentences) [[13]](https://www.writingclearscience.com.au/bullet-point-lists-versus-paragraphs/#:~:text=,consider%20using%20a%20table%20instead) Bullet point lists versus paragraphs | Writing Clear Science

<https://www.writingclearscience.com.au/bullet-point-lists-versus-paragraphs/>

[[18]](https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/management/aida-model-marketing/#:~:text=,the%20potential%20customer%E2%80%99s%20interest%20level) AIDA Model - Understand the Steps in the AIDA Model Hierarchy

<https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/management/aida-model-marketing/>

[[19]](https://expandi.io/blog/email-marketing-call-to-action/#:~:text=4,them) How to Write an Effective Call to Action in Emails - Expandi - Expandi

<https://expandi.io/blog/email-marketing-call-to-action/>

[[20]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=CTA%20at%20the%20Email%27s%20Top%3A,Direct%20Engagement%20Potential) [[21]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=A%20clear%2C%20standout%20CTA%20is,positioning%20can%20amplify%20its%20impact) [[22]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=CTA%20at%20the%20Email%27s%20Top%3A,Direct%20Engagement%20Potential) [[23]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=While%20CTAs%20offer%20opportunities%20for,resonates%20best%20with%20your%20audience) [[25]](https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta#:~:text=CTA%20at%20the%20Email%27s%20Top%3A,Direct%20Engagement%20Potential) Maximizing Email Engagement: The Art of Effective Call-to-Action - CTA Placement

<https://thebettercreative.com/email-design-blog/the-art-of-effective-cta>

[[24]](https://www.klenty.com/blog/subject-lines-personalization-statistics/#:~:text=We%20found%20that%20emails%20with,get%20opened%20by%20the%20prospects) Write Subject Lines that Double Your Cold Email Open Rates

<https://www.klenty.com/blog/subject-lines-personalization-statistics/>