

The Hierarchical Bullet List Dilutes Thought

LISTS often serve well for prompts, reminders, outlines, filing, and possibly for quick no-fooling-around messages. Lists have diverse architectures: elaborately ordered to disordered, linearly sequential to drifting around 2-space, and highly calibrated hierarchies of typographic dingbats to free-wheeling dingbat dingbats. In constructing lists, a certain convenience derives from their lack of syntactic and intellectual discipline, as each element consists of scattered words in fragmented pre-sentences.

PowerPoint promotes the hierarchical bullet list, surely the most widely used format in corporate and government presentations. Slides are filled with over-twiddly structures with some space left over for content. These formats usually require deeply indented lines for elements consisting of a few words, the power points. The more elaborate the hierarchy, the greater the loss of explanatory resolution, as the container dominates the thing contained.

It is unwise and arrogant to replace the sentence as the basic unit for explaining something. Especially as the byproduct of some marketing presentation software.

For the naive, bullet lists may create the appearance of hard-headed organized thought. But in the reality of day-to-day practice, the PP cognitive style is faux-analytical, with a bias towards promoting effects without causes. An analysis in the *Harvard Business Review* found generic, superficial, simplistic thinking in bullet lists widely used in business planning and corporate strategy:

In every company we know, planning follows the standard format of the bullet outline... [But] bullet lists encourage us to be lazy ...

Bullet lists are typically too generic. They offer a series of things to do that could apply to any business....

Bullets leave critical relationships unspecified. Lists can communicate only three logical relationships: sequence (first to last in time); priority (least to most important or vice versa); or simple membership in a set (these items relate to one another in some way, but the nature of that relationship remains unstated). And a list can show only one of those relationships at a time.¹⁷

The bullet-list format collaborates thus with evasive presenters to promote *effects without causes*, as in the fragmented generic points of cheerleading strategic plans and the dreaded mission statement:

- ★ **Accelerate The Introduction Of New Products !!!**
- ★ **Accelerate Revenue Recognition !!!**

Better to say *who* will accelerate, and *what, how, when, and where* they will accelerate. An effective methodology for making such statements is the *sentence*, with subjects and predicates, nouns and verbs, agents and their effects. Identifying specific agents of action may also eventually assist

¹⁷ Gordon Shaw, Robert Brown, Philip Bromiley, "Strategic Stories: How 3M is Rewriting Business Planning," *Harvard Business Review*, 76 (May–June, 1998), 44.