

Using Lists and Tables

11

A great way to let go of words without losing essential meaning is to use lists and tables. Lists put active space around each item. Tables take away redundant words. Both let people skim and scan.

Six guidelines for useful lists

Let's start with six guidelines for useful and usable lists.

1. Use bulleted lists for items or options.
2. Match bullets to your site's personality.
3. Use numbered lists for instructions.
4. Keep most lists short.
5. Try to start list items the same way.
6. Format lists well.

1. Use bulleted lists for items or options

A list is easy to skim and scan.

Madrid has many wonderful museums, including the world-famous Prado with its collection spanning many centuries; the Reina Sofia, featuring 20th century Spanish artists (Dali, Miró, Picasso, and more); and the Thyssen-Bornemisza, fabulous private collection of international art.

Madrid has many wonderful museums, including:

- Prado – world famous collection spanning many centuries
- Reina Sofia – 20th century Spanish artists (Dali, Miró, Picasso, and more)
- Thyssen-Bornemisza – fabulous private collection of international art



When you were reading the paragraph version, did you find yourself making a mental list?

Lists help people

- see how many items there are
- check off items (mentally, even if they can't write on the screen)
- find a specific item quickly

Think “list” whenever you have several options or items. Compare the presentation of the same information in Figures 11-1 and 11-2, on what to pack for camp.

Camp Voyageur

About CV	Prospective Families	Camp Family	Information	Employment
If the centered headline were at the left margin, it would draw our eyes down into the paragraph.		Packing List		
(:(Once registered for camp, campers receive a complete packing list to prepare them for their time in the northwoods. Camp is the perfect place to wear out old clothes, and we encourage campers not to overpack. Campers need a wool or fleece top, wool socks, rain gear (jacket and pants or poncho), wind pants (top and bottom that dry out quickly), broken in trail or hiking boots, shorts, swim trunks, t-shirts, sleeping bag, bedding for use in the cabin and little else while at camp. Bring you musical instrument, books and hobbies.		
(:(The writer uses both “campers” and “you” (“your”). Why not “you” for the camper throughout? Even if the camper’s parents are reading this, they’ll know that “you” is the camper.		“you” = typo for “your” Proofreading your content is important (see Chapter 14).	

Figure 11-1 A list in paragraph form is difficult to use.

www.campvoyageur.com

Camp Voyageur

About CV Prospective Families Camp Family Information Employment

Packing for camp

After you register for camp, we'll send a complete list of what to pack for your time in the northwoods.

The list makes the page much easier to scan.

Pronouns help the conversation.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Don't overpack.
- Bring old clothes.
- Be sure you have
 - a wool or fleece top
 - wool socks
 - rain gear (jacket and pants or poncho)
 - wind pants (top and bottom that dry quickly)
 - trail or hiking boots (broken in)
 - shorts
 - swim trunks
 - t-shirts
 - sleeping bag
 - bedding for use in the cabin

And, of course, bring your musical instruments, books, and hobbies.

Figure 11-2 My suggested revision

2. Match bullets to your site's personality

Round dark circles (ordinary bullets) are fine. However, if your site's personality and your content strategy allow something more innovative, you can show that personality visually in your bullets.

For example, the American Museum of Natural History uses different butterflies for each navigation option on the page about its butterfly exhibit (Figure 11-3).



Figure 11-3 Pictures of butterflies make good “bullets” for the links to web content about a butterfly exhibit.
www.amnh.org

More examples of graphics as bullets – Chapter 13 on illustrations

This should look familiar. I used the text of this page as an example in Chapter 10.

These butterflies “flutter” a bit within their white boxes as you mouse over them. That’s okay because they move only slightly. They stay in their boxes and move only when you hover over them.

In the first edition of *Letting Go*, I complained that the home page of this exhibit had butterflies fluttering all around the page, interfering with what people would be trying to do. I’m glad to say that those roaming butterflies are gone. The home page of this exhibit now features an excellent short video.

Bullets should reflect the site's personality

As you work with content strategists, brand strategists, and other colleagues to establish the site's personality, think about the ways you and others in the organization will use bullets. The bullets don't have to be identical throughout the site, but they should always fit the personality that part of the site is expressing. Your style guide for the site should include what content owners may use as bullets. (More on style guides in Interlude 5 after Chapter 14.)

If you use different bullets, make sure their meaning is clear. For example, the different colors of the bullets at the ABC Teach site might (or might not) indicate groupings or different sections of the site – but it's not clear if they do or what each color represents (Figure 11-4).

The screenshot shows the homepage of the abcteach website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for HOME, DIRECTORY, ABCTOOLS, INTERACTIVE, MEMBERSHIP, and a 'Join' button. To the right of the navigation is a search bar labeled 'search abcteach'. In the top right corner, there is a 'Member Login' section with a link to 'Forgot your password / user ID?'. The main content area features several sections:

- My Portfolio:** A box showing a cartoon character sitting at a desk with books and a pencil.
- Portfolios:** A section titled 'Portfolios' featuring icons for Spelling, Language Arts, French, and more.
- Seasonal Favorites:** A section titled 'Seasonal Favorites' featuring a tree and icons for Apples, October, Interactive, and Fire Safety Month.
- Core Subjects:** A section titled 'Core Subjects' listing categories like Art, Science, Counseling, Social Studies, Handwriting, Sports / P.E., ESL/Languages, Reading, Language Arts, Technology, Math, and Music, each preceded by a colored star.
- Sandy's Picks:** A section titled 'Sandy's Picks' featuring a grid for 'Math: Multiplication Grid: 10x10 fill-in (elem/upper elem)' and another for 'Color and Write: Stop, Drop, and Roll (primary)'.
- Popular Categories:** A section titled 'Popular Categories' listing categories like Interactive, Powerpoint, Fun Activities, Theme Units, Teaching Extras, Learning Centers, and Reading Comps, each preceded by a colored star.
- Learning Center: Fall Harvest (elementary):** A section titled 'Learning Center: Fall Harvest (elementary)' featuring a grid for 'Nomenclature Cards: Apple'.
- New Clip Art:** A section titled 'New Clip Art' showing a grid of small images.
- Classroom Spotlight:** A section titled 'Classroom Spotlight' showing a photo of children playing with playdough on a mat.
- Playing with Playdough and Teaching with Toys:** A section titled 'Playing with Playdough and Teaching with Toys' with a descriptive paragraph and a photo.

A yellow callout box on the left side of the page asks: "How is this site using colors? Are the colored stars random? Or meaningful?" with a thinking face emoji.

Figure 11-4 This colorful site looks like fun for teachers. But if people stop to wonder whether the colors indicate different sections or ages or something else, the site has caused them to take extra time.

3. Use numbered lists for instructions

Many of the conversations people have with web sites are about how to do something: arrange travel, pay a bill, buy a product, and so on. Tasks sometimes require instructions. Instructions imply sequence. Sequence = numbered steps.

To delete one of your Twitter updates, log in to [Twitter.com](#) and visit your Profile page. Then locate the Tweet you want to delete, hover your mouse over the message, and click the “Delete” option that appears.

To delete one of your Twitter updates:

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3. Locate the Tweet you want to delete.
4. Hover your mouse over the message.
5. Click the “Delete” option that appears.

You'll see the actual Twitter page later in the chapter (Figure 11-9).



Did you look at the paragraph at all? Did you go directly to the list? If you looked at the paragraph, did you find yourself turning it into a mental list, just as you did with the example in Guideline 1 about bullets?

Numbered lists help both site visitors and content authors.

With a numbered list, site visitors can

- see at a glance how many steps there are
- check off steps (mentally, even if they can't write on the screen)
- read one step, do it, and find the next step easily when they come back to the list
- do the steps in the correct order
- do all the steps (without inadvertently missing one)

With a numbered list, you as a content author can

- be sure you have not left out a step
- put the steps in the correct order (and save people from the potentially serious consequences of doing the steps in the wrong order)
- check that the procedure works well (by reviewing or trying out the steps)

Turn paragraphs into steps

Don't frustrate your site visitors. If your site visitors are asking "How do I?" give them instructions in a numbered list.

In Figures 11-5 and 11-6, on how to prepare concrete for a particular type of bonding, notice how I've turned three dense paragraphs into sections on why, what, and how. My revision with headings and lists is slightly longer than the original, but it is likely to be much easier for people to use.

Surface Preparation for Strain Gage Bonding

Surfaces Requiring Special Treatment

Concrete

 You cannot easily tell that the page has both "why" and "how" information.

Concrete surfaces are usually uneven, rough, and porous. In order to develop a proper substrate for gage bonding, it is necessary to apply a leveling and sealing precoat of epoxy adhesive to the concrete. Before applying the precoat, the concrete surface must be prepared by a procedure which accounts for the porosity of this material.

 The steps for doing the task are buried in these paragraphs.

Contamination from oils, greases, plant growth, and other soils should be removed by vigorous scrubbing with a stiff-bristled brush and a mild detergent solution. The surface is then rinsed with clean water. Surface irregularities can be removed by wire brushing, disc sanding, or grit blasting, after which all loose dust should be blown or brushed from the surface.

 People may be surprised to get this far in the instructions before learning that they need distilled water.

The next step is to apply Conditioner A generously to the surface in and around the gaging area, and scrub the area with a stiff-bristled brush. Contaminated Conditioner A should be blotted with gauze sponges, and then the surface should be rinsed thoroughly with clean water. Following the water rinse, the surface acidity must be reduced by scrubbing with Neutralizer 5A, blotting with gauze sponges, and rinsing with water. A final thorough rinse with distilled water is useful to remove the residual traces of water-soluble cleaning solutions. Before precoating, the cleaned

Figure 11-5 It's hard to find the steps in paragraphs like these.

www.vishay.com

If you write instructions as paragraphs, you may forget to put down a step and not notice. Your site visitors may lose their place in the paragraph and skip a step. When you write instructions in paragraphs, you may get steps out of order without realizing it, creating problems for people who are trying to do the task.

Preparing Concrete for Strain Gage Bonding

 I broke the information into “why,” “what,” and “how.”

 The bulleted list tells you what to have ready so that you aren’t surprised while doing the steps.

 I broke the 12 steps into three logical groups. A 12-step list with no breaks is long.

 I reorganized sentences to put the action verb at the beginning of the step.

 Each step is one action.

Why must concrete be specially prepared?

Concrete surfaces are usually uneven, rough, and porous. To develop a proper substrate for gage bonding, the concrete must have a leveling and sealing precoat of epoxy adhesive. Before applying the precoat, you must first prepare the concrete surface with a procedure that accounts for the fact that it is porous.

What do I need to prepare concrete for precoating?

You need

- [Conditioner A](#)
- [Neutralizer 5A](#)
- [gauze sponges](#)
- a stiff-bristled brush
- a mild detergent solution
- distilled water
- a wire brush or a disc sander or a grit blaster

How do I prepare concrete for precoating?

Clean the surface

1. Remove contamination from oils, greases, plant growth, and other soils by scrubbing vigorously with a stiff-bristled brush and a mild detergent solution.
2. Rinse the surface with clean water.
3. Remove surface irregularities by wire brushing, disc sanding, or grit blasting.
4. Blow or brush all loose dirt from the surface.

Apply Conditioner A

5. Apply Conditioner A generously to the surface in and around the gaging area.
6. Scrub the area with a stiff-bristled brush.
7. Blot contaminated Conditioner A with gauze sponges.
8. Rinse the surface thoroughly with clean water.

Apply Neutralizer 5A

9. Scrub the surface with Neutralizer 5A to reduce the surface acidity.
10. Blot with gauze sponges.
11. Rinse with clean water.
12. Rinse again with distilled water to remove the residual traces of water-soluble cleaning solutions.

Figure 11-6 My suggested revision

For branching, consider a table under the step

Instructions are not always a simple list where everyone must do all the steps. Sometimes, the next step depends on which of two or more conditions are true – “If this..., do x,” “If that..., do y.”

You can still give clear instructions. Consider Figures 11-7 and 11-8, where I show how I would clarify instructions on removing wine stains from fabric.

If the process is very long and complex, think about it as a little web site rather than as one web topic. Create a pathway page where each link leads to part of the process. Look back at Chapter 6.

How to Remove Red Wine Stains From Fabric

Instructions

Difficulty: Easy

Big numbers in color help make these instructions stand out.

In Step 1, what does “do not pretreat” mean? Should I not blot the stain? Should I blot but not go on to step 2?

Setting out “Things You’ll Need” visually like this is excellent.

Things You'll Need

- Landry detergent; laundry pretreatment or dish soap
- Clean sponge
- Washing machine
- Paper towels
- Hydrogen peroxide
- Towel or washcloth

- 1 Blot the stain immediately with paper towels. If it is a dry clean only garment do not pretreat the stain and get it as fast as you can to the cleaners. Pretreatment of the stain can cause irreversible damage and the dry cleaner may not be able to remove the stain.
- 2 Combine 1 teaspoon laundry soap or pretreatment (or dish soap, like Dawn) and 1 cup hydrogen peroxide in a small bowl. Soak a clean sponge in the mixture, squeeze it halfway dry, then gently blot the stain.
- 3 Place a dry towel or washcloth between the front and back of the garment if the stain has not penetrated through to the back of the fabric. This will prevent staining on the back of the material.
- 4 Review the washing instructions on the label of the fabric. Heed any special care instructions.
- 5 Wash in cool water and air dry if the fabric is machine-washable.
- 6 Wash gently in the sink with a mild detergent if the fabric is hand-wash only.

Steps 5 and 6 are alternatives. You do one or the other, not both. But they aren't formatted to show that.

Figure 11-7 When instructions include “if” statements, hiding the “if” inside an instruction or putting two “ifs” in consecutive steps may confuse people.

www.eHow.com

I wrote Step 2 to make explicit the branching that was implicit in Step 1 of the original.

The table in Step 5 makes the choice and resulting instruction easy to grab when skimming.

1.	Blot the stain immediately with paper towels.
2.	Check the label on the fabric. Dry clean only? Washable?
Dry clean only	Stop here. Get it as fast as you can to the cleaners. If you do more than gently blot the stain, the dry cleaner may not be able to remove it.
Washable	Follow the rest of these instructions.
3.	Combine...
4.	Place a dry towel...
5.	Review the washing instructions on the fabric. Machine-washable? Hand-wash only? Heed any special instructions.
Machine-washable	Wash in cool water; air dry
Hand-wash only	Wash gently in the sink with a mild detergent

Figure 11-8 My suggested revision to clarify the branching and alternative instructions

Follow “if, then” in instructions and tables

The original eHow instructions 5 and 6 use the structure “then, if”: “Wash in cool water and air dry if the fabric is machine-washable.” That’s backwards. You have to read to the end, decide if that’s true of your fabric, and then go back to the beginning to get the action.

Remember the concept of “given-new” – context before action – from Chapter 10, Guideline 8, Case Study 10-4. Always try to put the “if” part before the “then” part of a sentence.

However, the guideline to put context before action, if before then, conflicts with the guideline to start instructions with an action verb.

How do you do both? My solution: Make the decision point explicit with an action verb. (For example, Review the washing instructions...) Then put the “if, then” options in a table.

In the table, always put the “if” part in the first column. (More about that later in the chapter when we get to tables.)

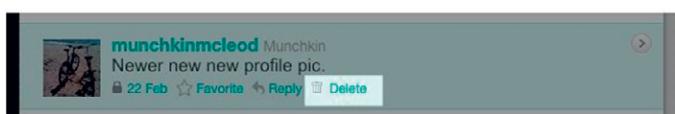
Show as well as tell

Sometimes, a picture can help clarify a step. The Twitter example that started this section shows where to find the “delete” option (Figure 11-9).

To delete one of your Twitter updates:

1. Log in to [Twitter.com](https://twitter.com)
2. Visit your Profile page
3. Locate the Tweet you want to delete
4. Hover your mouse over the message (as shown below), and click the “Delete” option that appears

Voilà! Gone forever... almost. Deleted updates sometimes hang out in Twitter search. They will clear with time.



Good conversation. The writer anticipates site visitors' question: "I followed your steps, but my message didn't disappear. Why not?"

Figure 11-9 Screen shots often help people use instructions.

<https://support.twitter.com>

Use numbered lists for noninstructions thoughtfully

Sometimes, you can use a numbered list when you are not giving steps. For example, blog articles like “10 Tips for …” or “5 Keys to …” are very popular. In many chapters of this book, I’ve numbered the guidelines. In these cases, it’s clear that the numbered items are not steps.

But if the same blog post included a numbered list of instructions, the two different uses of a numbered list might confuse people. If you have both types of lists – a set of instructions where people should do each step and a set of options where people should choose only one – don’t use numbers for both of those lists. Use numbers for the instructions and bullets for the options.

Case Study 11-1 shows how using both lists at once might confuse people.

Case Study 11-1

Using both bulleted and numbered lists

E-commerce sites have to explain when you can return an item and how to return it. They also want you to order something else, so they have to tell you how to reorder.

For how to reorder, Lands’ End does a great job. A bulleted list is best here because the four items are options. You do only one.

Want to reorder?

Choose whichever method is most convenient:

- Send back the items you wish to return, then place a new order online
- Send back the items you wish to return along with your completed reorder
- Call us at **1-800-963-4816**, or
- Fax us your completed packing slip reorder section at **1-800-332-0103**.

www.landsend.com

But higher up on the same web page, Lands’ End doesn’t follow that same good pattern when telling people how to return the item. They use numbers for the options and bullets for the steps.

Use any of the following options to return Lands' End products purchased online or from one of our catalogs.

Numbers with action verbs makes this list look like instructions.

But the numbers are for options. The bullets are the steps.

Notes at the end make some site visitors read instructions they can't use.

Option 2 also has steps, but they're buried in the paragraph.

1. Return Internet or catalog orders at a Sears store.

Just follow these guidelines

- Bring the Lands' End items you wish to return to any Sears® store.
- Make sure to bring the original packing slip for the items you wish to return.
- You will receive a return confirmation from Sears. Lands' End will then either credit your card, issue a refund check, or send you a Lands' End gift card, as you choose.

Please Note: Sears cannot accept exchanges or returns from Lands' End stores, Amazon.com®, or Lands' End Business Outfitters.

2. Use our Easy Return label for a flat fee of \$6.95.

Securely package the items you wish to return, fill out and include the Return Form, and affix the Easy Return shipping label found on your packing slip. Give the package to your mail carrier or drop it off at any U.S. Post Office or collection box. A flat fee of \$6.95 will be deducted from the amount of your refund.

Please note: Not all orders are eligible for the Easy Return label service. If your packing slip does not have one, use return methods 1 or 3.

3. Send your return to us with the shipper of your choice.

Securely package your return including the Return Form, and send to:

Using bullets where this example has numbers and numbers where it has bullets would better match people's expectations and would be more consistent. My suggested revision would look like this:

How do I return an item?

Choose whichever method is best for you:

Bullets for the three options.

Notes before the steps. Site visitors who can't use the option learn that before reading the steps.

Numbers for the steps.

Return catalog orders and some Internet orders at a Sears store.

Please note: If you bought the item from Amazon.com, a Lands' End store, or a Lands' End Business Outfitters, Sears cannot help with your exchange or refund. Use one of the other two ways to return the item.

To return an item at a Sears store:

1. Make sure you have the original packing slip for the item(s) you want to return.
2. Take the items and original packing slip to any Sears store.
3. Choose how you want your refund: credit on your card, a check, or a Lands' End gift card.

Sears will confirm in writing that you have returned the items. Lands' End will refund your money in the way you chose.

or

Use our Easy Return label for a flat fee of \$6.95.

Please note: First check to see if the packing slip that came with your item has an Easy Return label. If it does not, you cannot use this method. Use one of the other two ways to return the item.

To return an item with the Easy Return label:

1. Fill out and include the Return Form with your item(s).
2. Package the item(s) with the Return Form securely.
3. Affix the Easy Return shipping label from your packing slip on the outside of your package.
4. Give the package to your mail carrier or drop it off at any U.S. Post Office or postal collection box.

Lands' End will deduct the flat fee of \$6.95 from the amount of your refund.

or

Send your return to us with the shipper of your choice.

Securely package your item(s) with the Return Form and send to:
Lands' End Returns

4. Keep most lists short

How long can a list be and still work well? It depends.

Short (5–10 items) is best for unfamiliar items

If people will not immediately recognize all the items in the list, break up long lists. If possible, group the items so that you can make several shorter lists each with its own heading.

Look back at Figure 11-6 about concrete to see how I broke up a list of 12 items.

Long may be okay for very familiar lists

Some lists can be long because your site visitors immediately understand the topic of the list and know how far down the list the item they want is likely to be.

For example, a list of U.S. states and territories has more than 50 items. However, if the list is in alphabetical order, the length is not a problem for most people. They find the right entry quickly, whether you use a dropdown (Figure 11-10) or an open list (Figure 11-11).

If some of your site visitors want to print the list, it's better in an open format like Figure 11-11 than in a dropdown like Figure 11-10.

The screenshot shows a dropdown menu titled "Choose a State" with a "Go" button. The menu lists all 50 US states and two territories: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and the District of Columbia (DC). A small green smiley face icon is next to the first bullet point.

- Most U.S. site visitors can find their state quickly in a dropdown, even though the list is long.

A yellow box contains a smiley face icon and the text: "Some people love maps. Others find them hard to use."

The dropdown menu is overlaid on a map of the United States where each state is labeled with its name and a small blue outline. A yellow box contains a sad face icon and the text: "U.S. maps are difficult for people who need to select a small state."

At the bottom, a yellow box contains a smiley face icon and the text: "If you use a map, make it accessible by putting the list in an ALT-tag."

Figure 11-10 If your site visitors are familiar with the list, know which item in the list they want, and know how far down the list it will be, a long list may be okay.

If you have room, setting out a long list like this makes it easy to use.	A Alabama Alaska American Samoa Arizona Arkansas	G Georgia Guam	N Nebraska Nevada New Hampshire New Jersey New Mexico New York (except New York City) New York City	R Rhode Island
Grouping items logically and showing that with headings helps.	C California Canal Zone Colorado Connecticut	H Hawaii	I Idaho Illinois Indiana Iowa	S South Carolina South Dakota
	D Delaware District of Columbia	K Kansas Kentucky	O Ohio Oklahoma Oregon	T Tennessee Texas
	F Florida Foreign or high-seas events	L Louisiana	P Pennsylvania Puerto Rico	U Utah
		M Maine Maryland Massachusetts Michigan Minnesota Mississippi Missouri Montana		V Vermont Virginia Virgin Islands
				W Washington West Virginia Wisconsin Wyoming

Figure 11-11 If you have room, setting out the list like this works well.

www.cdc.gov

5. Try to start list items the same way

People are very pattern-oriented. We find it faster and easier to read a list when all the entries are in the same sentence structure.

- | | |
|---|--|
| To delete one of your Twitter updates: | To delete one of your Twitter updates: |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Log in to Twitter.com 2. Visit your Profile page. 3. Locate the Tweet you want to delete. 4. Hover your mouse over the message. 5. Click the “Delete” option that appears. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Log in to Twitter.com 2. You must then visit your Profile page. 3. The Tweet you want to delete must be found next. 4. Over the message, hover your mouse. 5. Click the “Delete” option that appears. |



Which list worked best for you? Did you choose the one on the left where each item starts with a verb?

But did you first assume it would be the one on the right – because all my previous comparisons have had the “good” choice on the right?

If you did, that’s how quickly you had built a pattern from the little tables like this in this chapter. I tripped you up (at least momentarily) by breaking the pattern I had created. (Sorry to do that. I did it to make a point.)

When you are writing web content, remember that if you set the patterns clearly and follow them well, your patterns can help people. Parallelism – starting each list item the same way – is an excellent pattern to create and follow.

6. Format lists well

Information design – the way you present information on the screen – can also help or hinder people from finding what they need easily.

Information design applies to lists (and tables) as well as to all other features of typography and layout.

When designing lists, you want people to connect the list with its introduction, see at a glance that you are giving a list, and find each list item easily. Four keys to formatting lists well:

- Reduce space between the introduction and the list.
- Put a space between long list items.
- Wrap lines under each other, not under the bullet.
- Put what happens on a line by itself.

Reduce space between the introduction and the list

Plain vanilla HTML puts a line of space between the text before a list and the first item in the list. To help people visually group the introduction with the list, reduce that space through a cascading style sheet (CSS). In this book, we use 12 points between paragraphs but only 6 points between the introduction to a list and the first list item.

Put space between long list items

Single spacing works for lists with short items. However, you need more space between items for numbered lists (where each item is usually a full sentence) and for bulleted lists where each item is more than a line long.

Wrap lines under each other

To make your lists look and work as lists, the bullets or numbers have to stand out. If the text wraps back to the beginning of the line (under the bullet or number), each list item looks like a paragraph with a funny symbol at the beginning. It doesn't look like a list.

Compare the Lands' End example I used (and revised) in the first edition with the way Lands' End gives the same list now (Figure 11-12).

Return Internet or catalog orders at a Sears store.

Just follow these guidelines:

- Bring the Lands' End items you wish to return to any participating Sears store where Lands' End merchandise is sold.
- Make sure to bring the original packing slip for the items you wish to return.
- You will receive a return confirmation from Sears. Lands' End will then either credit your card, issue a refund check, or send you a Lands' End gift card, as you choose.

This 2007 list was hard to use because the

- text wrapped back to the margin
- bullets didn't stand out
- page had no space between the bulleted items

Return Internet or catalog orders at a Sears store.

Just follow these guidelines

- Bring the Lands' End items you wish to return to any Sears® store.
- Make sure to bring the original packing slip for the items you wish to return.
- You will receive a return confirmation from Sears. Lands' End will then either credit your card, issue a refund check, or send you a Lands' End gift card, as you choose.

The 2012 version had none of those problems.

Figure 11-12 Make sure the text wraps under itself – not back under the bullet.

www.landsend.com

Put what happens on a line by itself

When giving instructions, sometimes you want to tell people what happens after they do a step. A good way to show that is to put the result on a line by itself, under the step, and indented like the step.

Figure 11-13 shows what I mean.

Testing your smoke detectors

You should test each smoke detector once a month. Here's how:

Keep each step to one action.

1. Tell everyone in the house that you are going to test the smoke detectors.

Note: If your smoke detectors are hard-wired to a monitored security system, alert the security company, too.

Indent notes.

2. Have someone go to the farthest point in the house to be sure they can hear the alarm.
3. Push and hold the test button.

The smoke detector should make a loud and continuing noise.

Put what happens on a separate line.

Figure 11-13 Keep the instructions easy to follow by putting extra information under the instruction and indented with the text.

Lists and tables: What's the difference?

Now that I have convinced you (I hope) of many good ways to use lists in your content, let's turn to tables. Tables, like lists, are a great way to let go of words so people can grab the essential information.



Think about the difference? What is a list? What is a table? When would you use each?

How lists and tables differ

	Lists	Tables
Categories of information	1	At least 2
Number of columns	1 (even if it wraps to look like more than one)	At least 2
Shows relationship?	No	Yes

The list of states and territories in [Figure 11-11](#) may look like a table because it is set in four columns. It's not. It's a list, wrapped on itself. It has only one category of information (names of states and territories).

A table is a set of “if, then” sentences. Read the first column as the “if” clause. Read the second column (and other columns) as the “then” clause(s). For example, “*If* we are comparing the number of categories for lists and tables, *then* lists have one and tables have at least two.” “*If* we are comparing the number of columns...” and so on.

Six guidelines for useful tables

Use these guidelines to help your site visitors find the right information for their situation quickly and easily.

1. Use tables for a set of “if, then” sentences.
2. Use tables to compare numbers.
3. Think tables = answers to questions.

4. Think carefully about the first column.
5. Keep tables simple.
6. Format tables well.

1. Use tables for a set of “if, then” sentences

When you see the same words repeated in several sentences (as in Figure 11-14), think “table.” Take the common words and make them the column headings. Remove the redundant words, as I’ve done for Figure 11-15.

The DME applicants are governed by the guidance in [FAA Order 8610.4. "Aviation Mechanic Examiner Handbook."](#)

The DPRE applicants are governed by the guidance in [FAA Order 8610.5. "The Parachute Rigger Examiner Handbook."](#)

The DAR-T applicants are governed by the guidance in [FAA Order 8100.8. "Designee Management Handbook."](#)

Figure 11-14 When you find yourself repeating words, as in this example, think “table.”

www.faa.gov

If you are applying for	You are governed by
Designated Mechanic Examiner (DME)	Aviation Mechanic Examiner Handbook (FAA Order 8610.4)
Designated Parachute Rigger Examiner (DPRE)	The Parachute Rigger Examiner Handbook (FAA Order 8610.5)
Designated Airworthiness Representatives Maintenance (DAR-T)	Designee Management Handbook (FAA Order 8100.8)



Each site visitor probably wants information from only one row of the table.



Tables save space and save site visitor’s time by letting go of words.

Figure 11-15 My suggested revision

2. Use tables to compare numbers

When you have numbers that relate to each other, think “table.” A table is a good choice for the comparisons in Figure 11-16, but we could improve the table in several ways.

 Shading every other row is a great way to make tables easy to use.

 The table allows quick comparisons of cost by season and vehicle size.

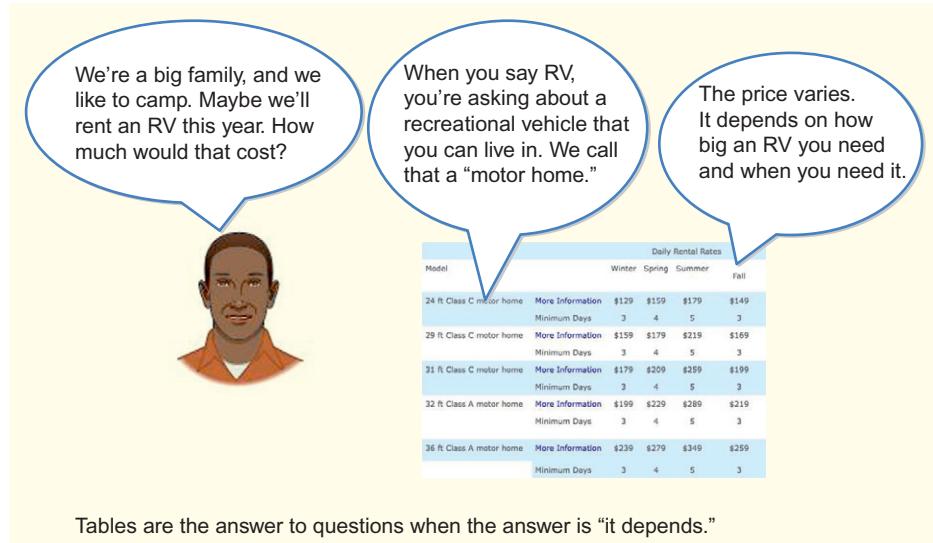
Model		Daily Rental Rates			
		Winter	Spring	Summer	Fall
24 ft Class C motor home	More Information	\$129	\$159	\$179	\$149
	Minimum Days	3	4	5	3
29 ft Class C motor home	More Information	\$159	\$179	\$219	\$169
	Minimum Days	3	4	5	3
31 ft Class C motor home	More Information	\$179	\$209	\$259	\$199
	Minimum Days	3	4	5	3
32 ft Class A motor home	More Information	\$199	\$229	\$289	\$219
	Minimum Days	3	4	5	3
36 ft Class A motor home	More Information	\$239	\$279	\$349	\$259
	Minimum Days	3	4	5	3

 The names make size differences obvious.
But what makes Class C different from Class A?

 A small picture or brief description would help show the differences among the vehicles.

Figure 11-16 Tables make numbers easy to compare, but this table could be even better.
www.unitedrvrentals.com/rental_rates.html

3. Think tables = answers to questions



We're a big family, and we like to camp. Maybe we'll rent an RV this year. How much would that cost?

When you say RV, you're asking about a recreational vehicle that you can live in. We call that a "motor home."

The price varies. It depends on how big an RV you need and when you need it.

Model		Daily Rental Rates			
		Winter	Spring	Summer	Fall
24 ft Class C motor home	More Information	\$129	\$159	\$179	\$149
	Minimum Days	3	4	5	3
29 ft Class C motor home	More Information	\$159	\$179	\$219	\$169
	Minimum Days	3	4	5	3
31 ft Class C motor home	More Information	\$179	\$209	\$259	\$199
	Minimum Days	3	4	5	3
32 ft Class A motor home	More Information	\$199	\$229	\$289	\$219
	Minimum Days	3	4	5	3
36 ft Class A motor home	More Information	\$239	\$279	\$349	\$259
	Minimum Days	3	4	5	3

Tables are the answer to questions when the answer is "it depends."

Tables answer questions. You don't have to use the question as a heading. You don't have to have the question anywhere in your table. But thinking about the conversation site visitors come with and the question(s) that the table answers can help you set up the table.

4. Think carefully about the first column

Whenever the answer to a question is "it depends," think "table." What the answer depends on becomes the first column of the table. The answer to the question for each site visitor's situation becomes the second column.

We read sentences across the page (left to right in English and many other languages, right to left in Arabic and Hebrew). When we identify text as a list, however, we read *down* the page. When we see a table, we scan down the first column to find our situation and then we look across that row to get what we need.

This is another case where the principle of "given-new" applies. (Look back at Chapter 10, Guideline 8, Case Study 10-4, the "yams.")

What if the answer depends on many things?

If the answer to people's question is "it depends on many things," you may not want to create a table. The table might have to be too complex for most web users or too large to fit well on the web page – and certainly to fit well on a mobile.

For example, the answer to "How much does a new laptop cost?" may be "It depends on how much memory you want it to have, what size screen you want, how fast you want it to run, what weight you are willing to carry, and so on."

For complex situations, consider asking site visitors a series of questions or giving them filters to apply to their choices rather than putting all the information in one table.

Case Study 11-2, about shipping costs, is relevant to every e-commerce site. It's also a great case for letting go of words, for the difference between a bulleted list and a table, and for handling multiple situations at the same time.

Case Study 11-2

Knowing when to use a table

Consider the typical conversation about shipping costs for any e-commerce site.



Consider the next example with a bulleted list. Is this the best way for the site to take the next turn in the conversation?

Shipping

For U.S. Shipping: Orders placed on our website will be shipped by UPS. Shipping charges for shipments in the contiguous U.S. will vary depending on the value of your order:

- \$3.99 for orders valued at \$0.00 to \$25.00
- \$5.99 for orders valued at \$25.01 to \$50.00
- \$7.99 for orders valued at \$50.01 to \$75.00
- \$9.99 for orders valued at \$75.01 up to \$100
- \$11.99 for orders valued over \$100



Did you come up with the same critique that I did?

We don't need the second sentence. The information in the list sends the same message.	Will site visitors understand "contiguous U.S."?	The first sentence is in the passive.
A list is not the best way to give this information. Each item is backwards.	Shipping	
You must read to the end of each item to see if it is the one for you.	<p>For U.S. Shipping: Orders placed on our website will be shipped by UPS. Shipping charges for shipments in the contiguous U.S. will vary depending on the value of your order:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$3.99 for orders valued at \$0.00 to \$25.00 • \$5.99 for orders valued at \$25.01 to \$50.00 • \$7.99 for orders valued at \$50.01 to \$75.00 • \$9.99 for orders valued at \$75.01 up to \$100 • \$11.99 for orders valued over \$100 <p>Two clues that this list should be a table:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each line has 2 categories of information. • The words "for orders valued" occur in each line. 	

Now consider the example with a table. Would this be a better answer to our site visitor's question?

Shipping charges													
<p>For U.S. Shipping (To all states, except Alaska, Hawaii, and territories)</p>													
 A short active sentence conveys a key message.	 We ship by UPS.												
 The table is much easier to scan than the list was.	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Value of your order</th> <th>Shipping charges</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>up to \$25.00</td> <td>\$3.99</td> </tr> <tr> <td>\$25.01 to \$50.00</td> <td>\$5.99</td> </tr> <tr> <td>\$50.01 to \$75.00</td> <td>\$7.99</td> </tr> <tr> <td>\$75.01 to \$100.00</td> <td>\$9.99</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Over \$100.00</td> <td>\$11.99</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Value of your order	Shipping charges	up to \$25.00	\$3.99	\$25.01 to \$50.00	\$5.99	\$50.01 to \$75.00	\$7.99	\$75.01 to \$100.00	\$9.99	Over \$100.00	\$11.99
Value of your order	Shipping charges												
up to \$25.00	\$3.99												
\$25.01 to \$50.00	\$5.99												
\$50.01 to \$75.00	\$7.99												
\$75.01 to \$100.00	\$9.99												
Over \$100.00	\$11.99												
 The value of the order goes in the first column because that's what people know when they come to the table.	 The shipping charges go in the second column. People look across the row from what they know to get the answer they need.												
 The link is clearer than "contiguous U.S." and helps people who need it get their information. (The original is ambiguous. Should this link also cover military APO, FPO? Should that be another link?)													

5. Keep tables simple

Two-column tables are best both for space and ease of use. Sometimes, however, you have more than two related pieces of information to give people for each row of a table. How large can a table be before it becomes too much for site visitors?

How many columns?

Use only as many columns as your site visitors will be able to see all at once on whatever screen they are using. If all your information pieces are small, you may be able to fit three or even four columns in your table and still have people see it even on their mobiles.

Consider web constraints

The web constrains us much more than paper did.

- **No fold-outs.** You can't create fold-out pages the way some old paper reports did.
- **No horizontal scrolling.** One of the strongest findings from usability testing is how few people notice a horizontal scroll bar.
- **Small screens.** You cannot assume that all your site visitors have large monitors with maximized windows. If your app or site is likely to be viewed on a mobile device, you know you need to keep your tables small. But even if all your site visitors are at desktop computers, they may still have smaller monitors than the one you are working on. They may magnify what they can see so they are not using your default resolution. They may keep many windows open and not use the entire screen for your site.

Consider breaking up large and complicated tables into a series of smaller, more specific tables. Or layer your tables – allowing your site visitors to drill down to more details through links in the table.

Consider site visitors' conversations

The example about renting an RV back in [Figure 11-16](#) combines size of vehicle, cost, number of days, and season all in one table – a lot of information. Yet, it may work because people are primarily using it for comparison. They actually want all that information.

The example in the case study is different. When they come to the Shipping Charges table, site visitors know where they want the package to be sent. Information for any other geographic location is not relevant and would only get in the way of their finding what they need.

That's why I would use links to take people to the small table that is relevant to the location they want. Having small, specific tables for shipping is easier for most people than a large matrix with information for different people in different columns. People have difficulty jumping over columns that are not relevant to them.



Research shows that older adults are less able to quickly suppress nonrelevant information than younger people are. As we age, our ability to sort relevant from nonrelevant seems to decrease.

Gazzaley, 2009

How many rows?

Although most site visitors scroll vertically today, a long table may be more difficult to use than a long list. A table shows relationships. Your site visitors must remember the column headings for a table to understand how the pieces of information in each row relate to each other.

Break very long tables into a series of smaller tables that allow you to keep the context-giving column headings close to the information.



For information on how to construct and tag a table so that screen-readers can work with it: <http://webaim.org/techniques/tables/>.

6. Format tables well

Information design applies to tables, too – as it does to all parts of all your web content.

Reduce lines: Help people focus on information

People use tables to see relationships along a row. Thick lines between columns stop people from moving easily along the row – just the opposite of what you want people to do.

Also, heavy lines draw people's eyes. You want your site visitors to focus on the essential information in the table, not on the lines between the pieces of information. Don't make each cell of a table into a box with thick, equal-weight borders all around it.

A few ways to format better tables:

- Eliminate outside lines around the whole table.
- Lighten the lines between columns.
- Use shading for alternate rows instead of lines.

The RV rental example in [Figure 11-16](#) shows how effective shading can be to separate rows of a table.

Line up columns: Don't center text in a table

Aligning text on the left makes each column easy to scan. Centering interferes with scanning in tables just as it does in other parts of your content. In tables, set all column headings and columns with words flush left, ragged right. When you give numbers, line them up on a decimal tab.



Which table is easier to use, [Figure 11-17](#) or [Figure 11-18](#)?

Account type	Minimum deposit to open account	Minimum daily balance for Annual Percentage Yield (APY)	Interest rate	Annual Percentage Yield (APY)
Money Market	\$250.	\$1,000.	0.4987%	0.50%
Gold Money Market	\$25,000.	Tier 1: \$0 - \$9,999.99	0.8957%	0.90%
		Tier 2: \$10,000 - \$49,999.99	1.09401%	1.10%
		Tier 3: \$50,000 and above	1.19401%	1.20%
Platinum Money Market	\$50,000.	Tier 1: \$0 - \$9,999.99	0.8957%	0.90%
		Tier 2: \$10,000 - \$49,999.99	1.09401%	1.10%
		Tier 3: \$50,000 and above	1.19401%	1.20%

Figure 11-17 Centering makes tables look busy and hard to use.

Adapted from the web site of a bank

Account type	Minimum deposit to open account	Minimum daily balance for Annual Percentage Yield (APY)	Interest rate	Annual Percentage Yield (APY)
Money Market	\$250.	\$1,000.	0.4987%	0.50%
Gold Money Market	\$25,000.	Tier 1: \$0 - \$9,999.99 Tier 2: \$10,000 - \$49,999.99 Tier 3: \$50,000 and above	0.8957% 1.09401% 1.19401%	0.90% 1.10% 1.20%
Platinum Money Market	\$50,000.	Tier 1: \$0 - \$9,999.99 Tier 2: \$10,000 - \$49,999.99 Tier 3: \$50,000 and above	0.8957% 1.09401% 1.19401%	0.90% 1.10% 1.20%

Figure 11-18 My suggested reformatting – aligning text on the left margin of each column and aligning numbers on the decimal point

Summarizing Chapter 11

Key messages from Chapter 11:

Lists

- Use bulleted lists for items or options.
- Match bullets to your site's personality.
- Use numbered lists for instructions.
 - Turn paragraphs into steps.
 - For branching, consider a table under the step.
 - Show as well as tell.
 - Use numbered lists for noninstructions thoughtfully.
- Keep most lists short.
 - Short (5–10 items) is best for unfamiliar items.
 - Long may be okay for very familiar lists.
- Try to start list items the same way.
 - Format lists well.
 - Reduce space between the introduction and the list.
 - Put space between long list items.
 - Wrap lines under each other.
 - Put what happens on a line by itself.

Tables

- Understand the difference between lists and tables.
- Use tables for a set of “if, then” sentences.
- Use tables to compare numbers.
- Think tables = answers to questions.
- Think carefully about the first column.
- Keep tables simple.
- Format tables well.
 - Reduce lines: Help people focus on information.
 - Line up columns: Don’t center text in a table.