Using Lists

Lists, by eliminating repetition, present parallel ideas concisely. **Horizontal lists**, lists within a paragraph, do not interrupt the flow of the text. **Vertical or stacked lists** are used for emphasis. They also make the information easy to find, easy to read and easy to use. Stacked lists, like headings and graphics, also improve readability by adding "white space", which breaks up long passages of text.

General Guidelines

All lists rely on parallelism; parallel ideas are presented in parallel grammatical structure. Don't put more than seven items in a list; use numbers for items that are ordered, such as instructions; and use bullets for lists which are unordered. Use a colon at the end of the lead-in for all but stacked lists that have a partial sentence lead-in and a partial and completing sentence list.

Types of Stacked lists

All lists have an introductory lead-in. The lead-in can be a single word, a sentence fragment (a part of a sentence), or a complete sentence.

Fragment Lead-in and Fragment List

Priorities:
-- product
-- service
-- profit
Note: a colon is used after the lead-in; there is no period at the end because there is no complete sentence.

Sentence Lead-in and Word or Fragment List

Ajax Sales Company has three priorities:
-- product
-- service
-- profit.
Note: a colon is used after the lead-in and there is a period after the last item because the lead-in and list make a complete sentence.

Partial Sentence Lead-in and Partial (and Completing) Sentence List

All new staff must
-- know their job description
-- follow company guidelines
-- work hard.
Note: there is no colon at the end of the lead-in because the lead-in and each item in the list make a complete sentence. A period is used after the last item of the list.

Complete Sentence Lead-in and Complete Sentence List

Here are some common errors in using lists:
-- A period is put at the end of a fragment lead-in, fragment list.
-- A colon is put after the partial sentence lead-in.
-- Items in the list are not parallel grammatically.
Note: a colon is used after the complete sentence lead-in, and a period is used after each of the complete sentences in the list.

List with Headings

Some lists start with a heading or a label:
-- **Overview** Each item on the list begins with a heading or label.
-- **Content** The heading is a word or phrase, and the rest is usually a sentence or sentences.
-- **Special Note** This style of list is best when each item is a paragraph. A lot of detailed information can be included in the list. However, the list should be used appropriately; it must not take the place of headings and paragraphs in a longer memo or a report.