

---

## Headings, Bulleting, and Highlighting

Business writing requires organization that lends itself to readability and efficiency. The three common means for achieving organization is to incorporate headings, bulleting, and highlighting into your document.

**Headings:** Headings are titles or subtitles that divide the main topic into subtopics. They organize information into chunks of like information and they cue the audience of a transition into a topic change.

- **Function:**
  1. to organize information for easy processing.
  2. to provide hierarchy of information.
  3. to signal transition.
  
- **Design:**
  1. **Heading One** is the highest level and should be bold.
  2. *Heading Two* is significant but not nearly as important and is usually italicized.
  3. Heading Three is less significant and is usually the same font as the text and may begin on the same line as the text with an underline.
  
- **Guidelines:**
  1. Avoid long noun strings—your heading title should clearly represent the information to follow.
  2. Be informative—it is better to have a longer heading than have a heading that isn't clear.
  3. Use grammatical form appropriate to your audience.
    - a) Question form works well for less knowledgeable readers.
    - b) “How to” is best for instructional material.
    - c) Gerunds –“ing words”- work well for discussions and descriptions of processes.
  4. Avoid back to back headings—they are illogical.
    - a) When you use a heading, provide information for that heading before adding another heading or subheading.

**Bulleting:** Bullets are used to avoid long, complicated sentences, to organize lists, and to prioritize information. Bulleted information assists your audience in remembering significant information. (Of all the various types of document design techniques, bulleting is the most difficult to master.)

- **Purpose:**
  1. to organize and condense long sentences (multiple clauses, multiple phrases, and long series).
  2. to organize and prioritize chronological information or steps.

- Guidelines:
  1. Set off each listed item with a number, letter, or a symbol.
  2. Use numbers to suggest sequence and use letters if you need to add information.
  3. Use bullets to avoid confusing either sequence or priority.
  4. Break up long lists—we can usually process about 5-9 items in a list.
  5. Always present lists in parallel structures.
    - a) Same type of sentence, clause, or phrase.
    - b) Same part of speech (adjectives, adverbs, nouns, verbs, preposition, conjunctions, interjections, and pronouns).
  6. Structure and punctuate the lead into the list correctly:
    - a) Use the colon correctly: do not use a colon to separate a verb from its objects or complements; do not use a colon to separate the preposition from its object; do not use the colon after expressions like “such as,” “especially,” or “including.”
  7. Punctuate the list correctly:
    - a) Phrases begin with a lowercase and do not require a period.
    - b) If the items are written as complete sentences, you will use uppercase and use a period.
    - c) If the items are phrases followed by complete sentences, use an initial uppercase letter and a final period.
    - d) If the list consists of two kinds of items—phrases and complete sentences—punctuate both with uppercase letters, and periods.

**Highlighting:** Highlighting is used to organize your work and for effect. It denotes titles, headings, and subheadings and directs the reader to interpret information according to the author’s intent. If one word in a sentence is italicized, that one word stands out. Creative writers use this technique to assist the reader to understand the mood or tone; business writers might italicize one word in a sentence to either connect that word with previous material or draw attention to its importance.

- Purpose:
  1. to point out types of texts (warnings and notes).
  2. to signify titles of books, journals, magazines, newspapers, websites, etc.
  3. to distinguish levels of headings.
- Guidelines:
  1. Bold is typically used for major headings and some subheadings.
  2. Italics is used within a works to signal the reader and for sub headings.
  3. Underline is used to identify heading 3 or to alert the reader to important information.

Only use highlighting when it is a part of the document design or to identify titles of works. If you must use a highlighting device to draw attention to a word or phrase within your text, do so sparingly. Too much highlighting for emphasis is similar to using exclamation points too often; the tool loses its meaning and becomes a distraction.