

The New Grammar of PowerPoint

Preserving clarity in a bullet-point age

The bullet-point construction has become ubiquitous in recent years, thanks at least in part to the PowerPoint communication revolution. I have written elsewhere about the mixed blessings of this revolution, but its impact is undeniable. In this article, I'd like to highlight the importance of grammatical standards in bullet-points so that PowerPoint continues to be an aid to communication rather than a barrier.

The challenge which PowerPoint poses is the need to reduce communication to its barest essence, to strip it of all which is superfluous. The bullet-point is almost the atom of ideas in that it cannot be further reduced without losing meaning. Retaining that meaning in the process is, of course, vital, and it is here where grammar has a real contribution to make.

The good news about the bullet-point is that it removes the need for virtually all punctuation. The idea is that if your bullet-point is long enough to need a comma, it is probably too long. Even a list of items which would traditionally have been separated by commas (items such as lists, recitations, inventories and roll-calls) is rendered not with commas, but with sub-bullets, thus:

- Items such as:
 - lists
 - recitations
 - inventories
 - roll-calls

Note an important grammatical point here. Where sub-bullets complete a grammatical structure begun in the parent like this, they shouldn't start with a capital letter, since in grammatical terms they simply continue an existing sentence rather than beginning a new one. This can be a challenge, since Word and PowerPoint will usually seek to make capitalisation automatic for you, assuming that a bullet-point will always constitute a sentence. Fortunately, this option can be turned off globally through Tools/AutoCorrect.

Having said that virtually all punctuation is redundant, there is one mark which certainly isn't. There was one in that last sentence and there's another in this one. It's the apostrophe, of course, and there was another just there. The apostrophe has long been the *bête-noire* of the novice punctuator, and saying that's all we have to worry about is a little like assuring the captain of the Titanic that other than icebergs, he has nothing to fear.

Still, a few simple rules will keep us on the side of the angels. Rule 1 of apostrophes is that they never pluralize. Now, you will have been presented daily with examples of people trying to do exactly that with them – *Book's for sale*, says the sign; my children's school newsletter commends the *boy's* and *girl's* for their fundraising efforts; you might pass a fruit and veg stall offering prices for *banana's*, *orange's* or *potato's* (to be fair,

even vice-presidents have had trouble with their vegetable plurals over the years.) All of these usages, of course, are wrong. It is *books* which are sold; *boys* and *girls* should be congratulated; my greengrocer can sell me *bananas*, *oranges* and *potatoes*.

So when do we use the apostrophe? Rule 2 is that an apostrophe denotes ownership. For instance, “I borrowed Karen’s ruler to measure the box’s dimensions.” If there were more than one box I needed to measure, it would be *the boxes’ dimensions*. Note that when the word is a plural ending in the letter S, then merely an apostrophe indicates the ownership, rather than another S as well. But when the word is not a plural, but just happens to end in S, the second S is employed, thus:

James’s dinner party
Mr Jones’s wallet
The heiress’s millions

Just to nail down this distinction fully, let’s now imagine that there are 5 Jameses in the room, a number of Mr Joneses and several heiresses. We could now talk about:

The Jameses’ dinner party (if they were all having a joint one)
The Jameses’ dinner parties (if each planned to host his own)
The Joneses’ wallet (if only one among them) or wallets (if each had his own)
The heiresses’ millions

This dropping of the S after an apostrophe only applies to plurals ending in S, and there are a few plurals in English which do not. This is why, when I referred a few paragraphs ago to the school attended by my children, I spoke of “my children’s school”, keeping the ownership S despite the plural.

I think it is because of the importance of the apostrophe in indicating ownership that the greatest abuse of the poor apostrophe arises. I’m speaking here of the great *it’s* vs. *it’s* problem. We often see constructions like, *The baby looks like it’s father*. You see the apostrophe there in *it’s*? It shouldn’t be there. And yet it seems so sensible, doesn’t it? It is after all indicating ownership, and we know this is a legitimate use of the apostrophe. But *its* is a special breed of word called a possessive pronoun. Let’s replace it in the sentence with an alternative possessive pronoun to get, *The baby looks like his father*. You see the point? Just like *his*, *her*, *your* and *their*, *its* in this context takes no apostrophe.

Rule 3 will help us understand when to use *it’s* with its apostrophe. It is that when you contract two words into one, the apostrophe keeps the place of the missing letters. Because this article is relatively informal in tone, you’ll have read a number of such contractions in it already. Overleaf are all the ones I’ve used so far, plus a few more.

Contraction	Full version
Let's	Let us
That's	That is
It's	It is
There's	There is
Isn't	Is not
Shouldn't	Should not
I'd	I would
You'll	You will
I've	I have
They're	They are
You're	You are
There'll	There will
Would've	Would have
Doesn't	Does not
Don't	Do not
Won't	Will not (not 'wo not' for some reason!)

Not unrelated to the apostrophe problem, my next point is what I call the substitution of similars. There are words which are spelled differently and have different meanings and yet which are often confused for each other or used interchangeably. We've already met such a pair of similars in *its* and *it's*. There are some others which involve apostrophes, too, as we'll see in a moment.

The substitution of similars is a problem particularly in the bullet-point construction, because the wider context in general which might give us more clues as to meaning is pared down to a minimum in bullet-points. Each word needs to pull its weight, and misuse of similars can render a bullet-point incomprehensible. It's also easier for one mistake in a 25-word sentence to be missed or forgiven by a reader than it is for one in just the 5 words which make up a bullet-point. Bear in mind, the spell-checker won't help you with such substitutions.

As another example of a similar pair, consider *your* and *you're*. "So it is your opinion that you're the greatest" demonstrates correct usage. *Your* indicates ownership – *your book, your hair, your personal problems* – while *you're* is a contraction of *you are*, as in *you're a bore* or *you're wonderful*. The next time someone writes to you that, "Your wonderful!" you should ask, "My wonderful **what?**"

There is also a rather troublesome threesome of similars as illustrated here: "They're saying that there is no spare key to their safe." *They're* is a contraction of *they are*, *their* means *belonging to them* and *there* doesn't relate to "them" (whoever they may be) at all! There is also a certain confusion sometimes between *there's* (contraction of *there is*) and *theirs* (another possessive form) as illustrated by, "There's a feeling that the mistake was theirs rather than ours.")

Not all of these similars involve apostrophes. Although rarer, we often see the words *to* and *too* used in each other's place. *Too*, of course, indicates a surfeit of some quality, so that the hotel might be said to be too expensive, the teacher too strict or the bed too soft. *To* on the other hand is used mostly in indicating a concept ("To grow as a person", "To do a good job"), to indicate motion towards ("Going to the fair", "He read to the end") or as a shorter version of *in order to* ("He looked at the last page to see how the tale ended.")

There seems also to be a growing level of substitution of *loose* for *lose*. You lose a few pounds for instance, which makes your clothes seem loose. A prison guard may lose his key only to find that as a result his prisoners get loose. In a slightly more old fashioned usage, an angry King might loose his armies on an enemy, but in doing so, he would be hoping not to lose them!

As a final couple of examples, we take a breath of air before taking a bath. Or, to put it another way, we breathe and then we bathe. Without the E at the end, a breath and a bath constitute nouns, or things. The addition of the E renders them as verbs, or actions.

The great economy of language which the bullet-point represents can often encourage writers to omit too much. Many is the time I've sat looking at a cryptic 3-word bullet-point on a PowerPoint slide and thought, "What on earth does that mean?" Sometimes, such ambiguity is intentional; often, it is not.

The greatest example of this is the dropping of the definite articles which pepper the everyday language. Or, to render that last sentence in PowerPoint:

- Greatest example is dropping articles

The "articles" we are talking about, of course are all those instances of the word *the*, which grammarians call the "definite article". (The word "a" is referred to as the "indefinite article", by the way.) In bullet-point format (and in newspaper headlines, incidentally), it is customary to drop articles freely and let the nouns stand alone. But there are times when at least some of them absolutely need to be retained. For instance, there is a difference between "school" and "the school" that needs preserving; the former relates to all schools, perhaps the very concept of educating children, whereas the second clearly refers to one particular establishment. Consider the difference between, "School is appalling." and "**The** school is appalling."

There is also the issue of what I call "internal articles". When we change *the cost of living* to *cost of living* we have dropped a leading article. When, on the other hand, we change *sign of the times* to *sign of times* then we have dropped an internal article. I would argue that dropping a leading article will often be acceptable, whilst internal articles should usually be preserved. Why? Simply because when we remove words from inside a phrase like this, it is harder for the reader to put them back. However colloquially we speak, we will always use *sign of the times* in speech rather than *sign of times*, so I would argue that

we should always retain the form in writing. Most people when reading turn the written words into ones they imagine being spoken in their heads, so the writer's task is to facilitate this process, and preserving the internal articles is one way to do this.

We've seen that PowerPoint requires a grammar, albeit a new, pared-down grammar, if its communications are to be understood. As things stand, the battle to establish such a grammar against the forces of grammatical anarchy is only just beginning. The other great new communications innovation of the age (if we accept that email is just an evolution of the written letter) is text messaging. It's generally accepted that that grammatical battle in that realm has been firmly lost and anarchy reigns. Given that the text messaging medium continues to prosper nonetheless, why should we worry about establishing a grammar for PowerPoint? Quite simply, it is because text messaging is a medium for private communications, where there is a wealth of external context to the message in terms of existing and ongoing relationships. PowerPoint, however, is about public communication, often to strangers and has to be able to stand on its own. I suggest that how we write our shopping lists and sticky notes matters not, but how we write our dissertations and public speeches certainly does.