

### 3 Simple Tricks that Will Change the Way You Think about Listicles Forever

Liz Owens Boltz (boltzeli@msu.edu)

Brian Arnold (arnol100@msu.edu)

Rohit Mehta (mehtaro3@msu.edu)

*Michigan State University*

*United States*

**Abstract:** In this interactive roundtable session, three educators from Michigan State University's Educational Psychology & Educational Technology program will guide participants through an exploration of the potential affordances and constraints the popular "listicle" format may offer for learning. After exploring the historical roots of this form and what existing research may indicate about its educational value, participants will create their own listicles as a means of debating its affordances for learning, and share their evaluation of its potential usefulness through debate and discussion. We will tie our discussion and activity to practical applications for the classroom, as well as discuss implications for teacher education.

*Keywords:* listicles, reading, digital literacy, multimodality, new media

#### Explore

We've all seen them: articles in list form that present us with curated digital content (a visit to BuzzFeed.com offers these gems: "17 Facts About Space Travel That Will Make You Go 'Huh?'" "34 Freaking Insane Pictures of Space and The Milky Way Taken From All Around India", and "15 Historical Women They Should Have Taught You About In School"). Listicles, as they have come to be known, are a way to aggregate, curate, and repurpose internet content--and they are seemingly ubiquitous.

Listicle conventions generally include interspersing blocks of text with images, animations or videos, in addition to the use of hyperlinks and provocative titles. They offer readers content in a pre-filtered, easily digestible, predictable format that aligns with contemporary practices of information consumption (Denning, 2014; Okrent, 2014; Sabatini, 2016). Listicles appear to be an efficient way to consume content, providing information that is brief, scannable, and easy to read, even on a mobile device. As such, listicles can be seen as time-savers for readers trying to quickly grasp a topic. Rapid comprehension based on reference to shared cultural tropes makes listicles ideal for sharing on social media--which may partially explain their meteoric rise in popularity.

Pundits have raised concerns about the common pitfalls of listicle use; they tend to enable hyperbole and clickbait; they can be poorly-written; they may cater to the notoriously short attention spans of internet users; and they frequently oversimplify complex issues (Billock & Wudel, 2015). Despite these possible shortcomings, listicles have gained increasing prevalence on the internet in recent years, featuring prominently in web searches and social media feeds. For good or ill, students *do* encounter listicles and glean information from them; it's therefore crucial that--at the very least--educators be familiar with the listicle form and its underlying modalities so that they may encourage students to critically evaluate them and use them responsibly.

Publishing important information in the format of a list has been a longstanding historical tradition, from the Ten Commandments to the Bill of Rights. More recently, Lichterman (2015) noted that it was a common practice for 19th-century newspapers to print lists and tables of facts--often borrowing content from other sources. This practice has evolved in the digital age to incorporate more multimodal elements.

This roundtable session will explore the affordances and constraints listicles offer to learners. We will begin the session by drawing from published research and teasing apart the listicle component modes, such as images, space, and printed text (and even sounds and gestures), that constitute this form (Kress & Van Leeuwen,

1996). For example, research suggests that when learners process information, they often tend to do so spatially; in other words, bullets, numbers, and categories can help us with recall (Miller, 1993). Mayer (2005) argues that we learn more from images and text than from text alone; and the process of making meaning across images and texts is more similar than different (Mehta & Mishra, 2016). Additionally, the incorporation of hyperlinks can provide jumping off points for readers to connect with more information on a particular topic. As such, listicles may encourage cognitive flexibility (Spiro and Jehng, 1990).

We will then approach the listicle format from a design perspective and discuss how listicle design may help enhance chunking and advance organizing information, and how it may potentially be beneficial in terms of reducing cognitive load (Salomon & Perkins, 2005). As Holden and Butler (2010) put it, “Chunking is a [design] technique of combining many units of information into a limited number of units or chunks so that the information is easier to process and remember” (p. 30). Listicles, too, regularly combine images and words, which may make them more conducive to learning.

We will tie research findings to practical considerations for the classroom and beyond. Reading listicles, for example, may provide an engaging way to introduce students to a topic; that is, they may offer a pathway to surface understanding, providing preparation for future learning. On a basic level, they can draw attention, encourage further reading, and transform situational interest into sustained interest (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). On the other hand, listicles are unlikely to be a good fit for all levels of learning objectives--mathematical equations or complex theories would be difficult to compress in this way without leaving out important details.

## **Create**

Listicles aren't just about consumption, however. Encouraging students to move from consumption to production involves an awareness of the form's conventions, curation of appropriate content and skills to write with spatial, visual, textual, and temporal modes of representation that affect meaning (Kress, 2003). Calling upon the reader to invoke outside context to make meaning involves higher order thinking skills often absent in the rote reading of fact based text.

Creating listicles opens up a slightly different set of affordances and constraints. We will mirror this in our session. Participants are encouraged to bring their devices to the session so that they can interact with our presentation materials (including examples and research). This will lead into an interactive session in which participants will engage in discussion and debate about the affordances and constraints of the listicle format, and how these may inform “pretty good practices” (Mishra, 2009) for their use in educational contexts.

Using their own devices or old-fashioned pen and paper, participants will create their own listicles based on their sense of *when* and *how* the listicle might be useful for learning (or how they may *not* be useful for learning). Listicles tend to draw heavily from commonly understood context and pop culture references while promoting a great deal of remixing and repurposing of existing content. Regardless of whether they are using digital or analog methods of production, participants will be encouraged to consider how links and multimedia content could enhance meaning within their listicle. We will also give a few topic examples to help attendees get started, such as: 10 Reasons to Avoid Listicles Like the Plague; 12 Ways Listicles Are Changing the Way Kids Learn; or 15 Tips for Using Listicles in the Classroom. We are hopeful that a variety of creative approaches, informed both by [existing resources](#) and by the differing opinions of attendees, will emerge in this activity.

## **Share**

One of the most powerful features of listicles--which has contributed to their popularity on social media outlets--is that they are shareable. Together, in our session, we will evaluate the affordances and constraints of several digital and non-digital spaces accessible to educators. We will discuss the reasons for choosing listicles in classroom practice for face-to-face, online, and blended settings. We will evaluate best practices for sharing these in different settings, and share the listicles created during the roundtable session with other participants. Our session will leverage the social affordance of the form by encouraging attendees to share their work on social media as well, using #SITElisticles. The session will conclude with a roundtable sharing of

participants' listicles, personally and via social media, followed by a discussion of their thoughts on the process as well as pretty good practices that could inform their use in and out of the classroom.

We will also discuss the implications that the listicle may have for teacher education. Teachers may find listicles to be useful as a means to narrow down a lesson into a short list of key concepts or ideas that could serve as an effective, low-stakes introduction to a particular topic. Students may find them to be less threatening than a more formal academic activity, and their use may promote out-of-class learning, offer opportunities to iterate and revise, and foster collaboration. Listicles are no different from other formats and tools, however—they require a thoughtful mindset that involves careful consideration of how, when, and why they might be useful in the classroom, and with what types of content. In this session, we will emphasize that like many other learning activities, the use and creation of listicles should be context-dependent.

## References

- Billock, J., & Wudel, K. (2015, April 10). 5 Shocking Ways Listicles Are Destroying Civilization. Data for Good. Retrieved from <https://www.good.is/articles/online-lists-are-making-you-dumber>
- Denning, S. (2014, August 29). Five Reasons Why Millennials Love Listicles. *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2014/08/29/five-reasons-why-millennials-love-listicles>
- Edidin, R. (January 2014). Five Reasons Listicles are Here to Stay, and Why That's Okay. *Wired Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.wired.com/2014/01/defense-listicle-list-article/>
- Hidi, S., & Renninger, K. A. (2006). The four-phase model of interest development. *Educational Psychologist*, 41, 111-127.
- Kerne, A.; Webb, A.; Smith, M.; Linder, R.; Lupfer, N.; Qu, Yin; Moeller, J.; and Damaraju, S. (2014). Using Metrics of Curation to Evaluate Information-Based Ideation. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*. 21(3). 1-48.
- Konnikova, Maria (2013, December 2). A List of Reasons Why Our Brains Love Lists. *The New Yorker*. <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/a-list-of-reasons-why-our-brains-love-lists>
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the New Media Age*. Routledge.
- Kress, G. R., & Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: the grammar of visual design*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Lichterman, J. (2015, May 19). Listicles, aggregation, and content gone viral: How 1800s newspapers prefigured today's Internet. *NiemanLab* [website]. Retrived from <http://www.niemanlab.org/2015/05/listicles-aggregation-and-content-gone-viral-how-1800s-newspapers-prefigured-todays-internet/>
- Lidwell, W., Holden, K., & Butler, J. (2010). *Universal principles of design, revised and updated: 125 ways to enhance usability, influence perception, increase appeal, make better design decisions, and teach through design*. Rockport Pub.
- Mayer, R. E. (2005). *The cambridge handbook of multimedia learning*. New York;Cambridge, U.K.;: Cambridge University Press.
- Mehta, R. & Mishra, P. (2016). *Switching between reading stances: Intertextuality and comprehension in multimodal texts*. In Proceedings of Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference 2016 (pp. 1469-1475). Chesapeake, VA: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE).
- Miller, G. (1993). Psychology and information. *Journal of Computer Documentation*. 17(3). p. 3-6. DOI=<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/165552.165556>
- Mishra, P. (2008, April 10). *Best practice vs. PGP* [Web log]. Retrieved from <http://punya.educ.msu.edu/2008/04/10/best-practice-vs-pgp/>
- Okrent, A. (January 2014). The Listicle as Literary Form. *The University of Chicago Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://mag.uchicago.edu/arts-humanities/listicle-literary-form>

Sabatini, P. (2016, July 25). Millennials, Listicles, and Learning. *Next Thought* [website]. Retrieved from <https://nextthought.com/thoughts/2016/07/millennials-listicles-and-learning>

Spiro, R. J., & Jehng, J.-C. (1990). Cognitive Flexibility and Hypertext: Theory and Technology for the Nonlinear and Multidimensional Traversal of Complex Subject Matter. In *Cognition, Education, and Multimedia: Exploring Ideas in High Technology* (pp. 163–205).