

Listverse Author's Guide

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This is a guide to the writing style of Listverse. Its aim is to help authors style their writing to conform to the uniform voice we wish to present to our readers. The closer you adhere to this guide, the more likely it is that your list will be accepted for payment.

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APPENDIX I—Popular Listverse Lists

1. Popular Content Type

Listverse readers have very particular tastes; if you tailor your submission to these tastes, you will have a far greater chance of having your list accepted for publication. We receive a lot of lists that we have to reject so this point cannot be stressed enough. This is a non-exhaustive list of the most popular subjects:

I. Mysteries: Mystery lists are the most popular. Unsolved mysteries about man, the universe, monsters, UFOs, aliens, demons, ghosts, witches, etc. If you have a list dealing with this subject and it is not already covered on Listverse, it will probably be accepted if you comply with the rest of this guide. As you will see in the next point, uniqueness is also essential here. We don't want to read about the Loch Ness Monster. We don't want to read about Bigfoot, chupacabra, the Bermuda Triangle, etc. If your friends probably know the mystery—we do too. Unless you can tell us something we don't know about them, leave them out. Google search Listverse to ensure you don't duplicate content.

II. Dark side of man: Lists which discuss the darker-side of man always do well. Lists of this type are *Top 10 Evil Men*, *Top 10 Evil Women*, *Top 10 Evil Human Experiments*, etc. Be warned: we all know that Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, Mao performed evil acts. We don't need to hear more about them. If you can tie the list into

history it will be even more popular; for example the Gilles de Rais is a fascinating character and his inclusion on a list made it even the more popular. But we have already had him on a list so don't include him unless it for some completely unexpected reason . . . such as *Top 10 Evil Men Who Weren't*, for example.

III. Secrets: This is a little different from mysteries. This is subjects that the average person either doesn't know, or isn't meant to know. Secret codes, ciphers, places that are forbidden to the average person. If you can make our readers desperate to know the answer to something or to go somewhere they are not allowed, you have created a top-notch list.

IV. Facts or Misconceptions: Tell us something we don't already know. It won't be easy—the Listverse editors' combined brainpower is like Einstein's brain times ten . . . on steroids! Popular lists in this area are facts we don't know, disproving something we commonly believe to be true, or generally telling us more about something we already knew. So a list of *Top 10 Amazing Facts about Dreams* was popular, but so was *Biblical Facts Everyone Gets Wrong*. If we believe it, and you can prove us wrong: we will love your list.

V. History: Lists that deal with historical topics are often very popular. But these should not be dry lists—they still need to be a twist on something. For example *Top 10 People Who Were Burned At the Stake*, might be interesting, but it isn't amazing. Better would be: *Top 10 People Who Were Burned At the Stake And Lived*. That is a list that would make people's heads turn. No one ever did survive incidentally—at least not that we are aware of.

While these five areas are the most popular themes in our top articles, you shouldn't be discouraged from sending in something which doesn't quite fit. There are always lists that appeal for other reasons.

2. Uniqueness

Content that can't be found on the Internet is a must. To be at the forefront of Internet publishing it is essential to always be sharing new information. This obscurity of information makes something very enticing—it attracts readers.

This uniqueness can sometimes overrule the popular styles above; for example we recently published a list of photographs of where children sleep around the world. It was incredibly popular because it showed a mundane part of our own lives from eyes through which we will never see. We were the first site to publish such a large and clear collection of these images. You can read that list here: <http://bit.ly/10845iS>

However, that is not to say that we are looking only for a unique take on something well known . . . such as a novel look at a movie or celebrity. Lists derived primarily from pop culture are not particularly popular. Pop culture can—of course—appear in your writing but, like comedy, it should be secondary to the topic.

Perhaps most importantly, your lists should not contain any entries from lists already found on Listverse unless it is given in a completely different light and context.

3. Simplicity

The greatest writers of English literature all say the same thing: cut, then cut, then cut again. Good writing comes from revision. Sylvia Plath would write a poem then erase seventy percent of it. If you can find a short word instead of a long one, use it. If there is an Anglo-Saxon word that can be used instead of a word from Latin or French, use it. Make sentences short. A handy tool you can use to gauge how concise you write is the Flesch-Kincaid index.

The index tells you the readability level of your writing. The best English literature is readable by an eleven year old. Not because it is dumbed down but because it has no extra complicated words that don't add to the value of the writing. This author guide scores in the low seventies; that means a thirteen year old can read it. If you don't cut your text you will score in the fifties. The lower the score the worse it is. Here is an example of great writing that shows that even when you write for adults, you need to write concisely:

"We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like "I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive..." And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about a hundred miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas. And a voice was screaming: "Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?"—Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, by Hunter S. Thompson.

Can you guess the Flesch score of the above paragraph taken from one of the greatest books of the twentieth century. It is **84.2**. That is the reading level of a 12-year-old. It doesn't score high because it uses childish words or phrases; it scores high because it has only as many words as are needed to convey its meaning. You can check out how your text scores here: <http://bit.ly/SYPxoh>

4. Remarkability

Your list needs to be remarkable. If the concept you pitch to us already exists somewhere else on the Internet . . . it is not remarkable. Your list needs to turn heads; your list needs to excite people because they have never seen it before. Read each item and ask yourself: "Would my friends read this and say 'Wow!'" If the answer is yes, you probably have a remarkable list.

5. Pronouns

Prefer the use of the inclusive "we." By using "we" as the default pronoun, the readers feel included, as if they are on a learning journey together with the author.

The use of "I" is permitted on occasion but it should be used sparingly as it tends to create a divide between the author and the audience; the aim is to draw people in, not cause division.

The use of "you" is permitted as long as it is not being used to ridicule or talk down to the readers.

Here is an example introduction from the *Top 10 Gruesome Fairy Tale Origins* that demonstrates the correct use of pronouns:

Fairy tales of the past were often full of macabre and gruesome twists and endings. These days, companies like Disney have sanitized them for a modern audience that is clearly deemed unable to cope, and so we see happy endings everywhere. This list looks at some of the common endings we are familiar with – and explains the original gruesome origins. If you know of any others, be sure to mention it in the comments – or if you know of a fairy tale that is just outright gruesome (in its original or modern form), speak up.

6. Facts

Facts are the lifeblood of Listverse lists. On average, each item in a list should have three new facts—preferably facts that are not otherwise presented on the site and are not common knowledge. The more facts you can fit into an entry the better. Please note that *facts are not just details*—they are interesting pieces of rare information. Facts come before humor always. That doesn't mean you should put jokes at the end of each item, it means precedence must always be given to the facts. Here is an example of one entry from *Top 10 Poisonous Foods We Love To Eat*. Facts are in bold.

*First off, a little interesting trivia: in the US, thanks to a US Supreme Court decision in 1893, **tomatoes are vegetables**. In the rest of the world they are considered to be fruit (or more accurately, **a berry**). The reason for this decision was a tax on vegetables but not fruit. You may also be interested to know that technically, **a tomato is an ovary**. The leaves and stems of the tomato plant contain a chemical called "**Glycoalkaloid**" which causes extreme nervousness and stomach upsets. Despite this, they can be used in cooking to enhance flavor, but they must be removed before eating. Cooking in this way does not allow enough poison to seep out but can make a huge difference in taste. Finally, to enhance the flavor of tomatoes, **sprinkle a little sugar on them**. Now we just need to work out whether they are "toe-mah-toes" or "toe-may-toes".*

As you can see in this example, a little subtle humor is added at the end of an otherwise relatively dry entry. Here is another example from *Top 10 Places You Don't Want To Visit*.

*Inspired by the **Botanical Gardens in Padua, Italy** (the first botanical garden which was created to **grow medicinal and poisonous plants** in the 1500s), the Alnwick Poison Garden is a garden devoted entirely to plants that can kill. It features many plants grown unwittingly in back gardens, and those that grow in the British countryside, as well as many more unusual varieties. Flame-shaped beds contain belladonna, tobacco and mandrake. The Alnwick Garden **has a Home Office license** to grow some very special plants; namely, *cannabis* and *coca* which are found behind bars in giant cages – for obvious reasons.*

7. Sources

Sources are *essential* to Listverse lists as we deal in facts. You need to back up every factual assertion with links to reputed websites. Please avoid using tabloid newspapers as your source and definitely don't use Wikipedia.

Some sources are just about always off-limits: tabloids like Daily Mail, National Enquirer, The Sun, Mirror, Metro, NY Post, Examiner. Sites like About.com, suite101.com, geocities, hubpages, angelfire, Ranker, damninteresting are generally unreliable. Places like todayifoundout.com, boinboing.net, Cracked.com, and mentalfloss are rarely (if ever) reporting their own news and are more often just linking to someone else's story. Let's go to the original source. Wikipedia, squidoo, and random people's blogs (URLs with blogspot, wordpress, tumblr, etc. in the name) generally aren't reliable because anyone can make or edit them. Forum boards (like FreeRepublic and reddit) are usually out as well.

We're aiming for more reputable sources like news organizations (local or national) that people have heard of and would recognize—organizations that actually have a reputation to uphold and care about getting facts right. Scholarly journals, academic publications, peer-reviewed scientific studies are all good news. Google Books and newspapers are usually reputable.

If you have a source that doesn't seem very reputable or like it's just recycling someone else's story, let's see if they have a primary source (reporter on the scene, interview with the person, academic paper they're summarizing, etc) or if we can find out who they're getting the story from (and then we'll use that as our source, too). These bloggy/webby secondhand sources often just recycle each other's content in an endless rumor mill, stretching details and inserting little sensational bits to get clicks and we'd like to try to avoid becoming one of those sites, so

we're stepping up our sourcing requirements.

In order to streamline the process, we'd like to implement the format used by one of our writers that we've found to be very easy to edit.

Please number your entries in descending order, as lists appear when published on the site. You also don't need to include periods in the header (we just need to remove them later anyway): As seen below, "9 War" looks spare, but it's all we need.

We've bolded the in-text citations below so they stand out, but that's only for this document (you won't even have the ability to use bold on the site submission form). Please include those in-text citations after the pertinent fact from the entry that they're backing up. This lets us know exactly what each cited link should be proving.

Also, all the links go together at the **end of the entire list**. This is so we can just paste them into another window all in one lump and then easily switch between windows. Your citation numbering should count up through the entire list, not restart for each entry.

9 War

*If there's one thing even better for sales than violence, it's the threat of war. Mere months ago, the world watched on tenterhooks as North Korea targeted its missiles and threatened to rain nuclear destruction on the West. Every news outlet was full of breathless analysis and maps (**LINK 7**) showing how the US lay within strike distance—despite there being no possibility of whatsoever of war.*

*As in none: zilch, zero, nada. The fact is, a North Korean 'attack' would almost certainly end with the missile failing to launch or falling into the sea, for the simple reason that their technology sucks. Analysis confirms that Pyongyang has yet to build a bomb small enough to fit on a missile (**LINK 8**); while experts agree (**LINK 9**) that Kim's recent bluster was just that: bluster. So, we essentially have a non-story about a fat little tyrant bawling for attention half the world away, and our media spins it into a narrative where we're all on the verge of annihilation.*

*Nor is this a one-off. Not six months earlier, major papers were literally calling on Obama to stop Iran's nuclear ambitions with a devastating airstrike (**LINK 10**), only for the Iranian people to peacefully kick the hard-line nutjobs out of office less than a year later. In other words, the media's reporting of this kind of thing is almost scarily irresponsible, just as it is with . . .*

[end of entry]

(Again, these links go at the **end of the document**, and they're each specifically targeted to each fact in the text.)

LINK 7: <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2013/04/world/north-korea-missile-capabilities/>

LINK 8: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11813699>

LINK 9:

http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57578835/north-korean-dictator-kim-jong-un-has-everything-to-lose-in-new-war-expert-says/

LINK 10: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/apr/3/why-we-must-strike-iran/>

8. Humor

Humor is important in a list. But humor needs to stem naturally from the main task at hand: educating with short facts. Humor should be gentle and witty—think Stephen Fry not Jim Carrey. We want our lists to make readers chuckle, not guffaw. Here is an example from *Top 10 Gruesome Fairy Tale Origins*:

In the original sleeping beauty, the lovely princess is put to sleep when she pricks her finger on a spindle. She sleeps for one hundred years when a prince finally arrives, kisses her, and awakens her. They fall in love, marry, and (surprise surprise) live happily ever after. But alas, the original tale is not so sweet (in fact, you have to read this to believe it.)

In the original, the young woman is put to sleep because of a prophesy, rather than a curse. And it isn't the kiss of a prince which wakes her up: the king seeing her asleep, and rather fancying having a bit, rapes her. After nine months she gives birth to two children (while she is still asleep). One of the children sucks her finger which removes the piece of flax which was keeping her asleep. She wakes up to find herself raped and the mother of two kids.

Another approach is found in the same list: “*The 1989 version of the Little Mermaid might be better know as ‘The big whopper!’*”

Listverse is not a humor site, it is a facts site.

9. Author's Voice

We are happy for the author's voice to show through as we consider each writer to be a columnist; but care should be taken to ensure that this does not extend outside of the guidelines here.

First and foremost the readers should feel you are credible and trustworthy. You don't need to write like you are writing an essay, but you should maintain a high standard.

10. Biblical References

When quoting from the Bible all references and quotes should be taken from the Douay-Rheims (DR) edition only. A complete copy of the DR can be found here: <http://drbo.org>. The DR is the approved Catholic English language edition of the Bible and aside from containing the original canon as defined in the fourth century (seven more books than the cut-down version used in Protestant religions), its English is clearer and less ambiguous than the King James edition.

11. Profanity

We do not publish profanity on Listverse unless it is part of a genuinely sourced quote or the title of something published. We will, in general, use em dashes to obscure parts of the profane words. The reason for this is that a writer should be able to always find a better word to express their point. Profanity will usually lower people's perception of the writer's ability.

12. Demographics

10 percent of Listverse readers are under 18

50 percent are between 18 and 34
40 percent are over 34

We are generally targeting the intelligent 18+ audience.

13. General Editorial Information

We use our own house style for editing but supplement that with the 16th Edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*. While you needn't adhere to that directly in your own writing, if you are familiar with the style by all means feel free.

We will rewrite if necessary, but the less rewriting we need to do the more likely it is that your list will be purchased. Spelling mistakes and basic grammatical errors are usually cleared up if you do multiple revisions of your list before sending it in. If you're having trouble, we'd recommend reading it aloud or having a friend look it over.

We use metric measures and convert them to Imperial in parentheses.

We write with an American audience in mind so we use American standard spelling (based on the latest edition of the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary). Please run your list against an American spellchecker before submitting.

14. Final Note

We return all lists that require a lot of editing. Please make sure you read, re-read, and re-read before submitting. Slowing down the editorial process slows down payments and publication.

APPENDIX I—Popular Listverse Lists

This is a short list of some of the most popular content on Listverse:

Top 10 Gruesome Fairy Tale Origins . . . <http://bit.ly/10G9NOK>
Top 10 Evil Serial Killers . . . <http://bit.ly/VcsvrI>
Top 10 Hidden Images in Cartoons . . . <http://bit.ly/10G9Ud8>
Top 10 Codes You aren't Meant to Know . . . <http://bit.ly/10G9YtF>
Top 10 Strange Things About the Universe . . . <http://bit.ly/VcsGTi>
Top 10 Facts about Sex . . . <http://bit.ly/VcsL9D>
Top 10 Prophecies You Don't Know . . . <http://bit.ly/10Ga843>
Top 10 Creepy Mysteries You Haven't Heard Of . . . <http://bit.ly/10Ga9oA>
Top 10 Evil Human Experiments . . . <http://bit.ly/10GaasR>
Top 10 Terrifying Places on Earth . . . <http://bit.ly/YmFUAV>
Top 10 Places You Can't Go . . . <http://bit.ly/10Gajwc>
Top 10 Conspiracy Theories . . . <http://bit.ly/10GanfE>