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The listicle as literary form

BY ARIKA OKRENT, PHD'04 | UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO MAGAZINE—JAN-FEB/14

Arika Okrent, PhD'04, lists the reasons why the listicle is a popular literary form.

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Every form of writing has its established conventions, and writers have to learn the nature of those conventions as they go. I've written scientific summaries, academic articles, journalistic essays, and a book, but these days, as a language columnist for online publications the *Week* and *Mental Floss*, I mostly write listicles.

A listicle is an article in the form of a list. I'd like to think the ones I do count among the nobler examples of the genre—less “15 Best Butts in Hollywood,” more “12 Mind-Blowing Number Systems from Other Languages.” There's nothing about the form of the listicle itself that prevents it from dealing with highbrow or important subjects, and increasingly, news of all kinds is being delivered in this form (“11 Architectural Innovations that Made the Modern City Possible,” “7 Supreme Court Cases that Could Change the Country,” and so on). Still, there are good reasons to object to the rising ubiquity of the listicle. It caters to our Internet-fed distractible tendencies, critics say, replacing complex arguments and reasoned transitions with snack-packs of bullet points.

We don't want to get all of our news through listicles for the same reason we don't want to get all of our news in haiku or limerick form. But that doesn't mean the haiku and the limerick aren't fine forms to work in. Like listicles, they are also compact packages of predictable structure that people enjoy reading. On second thought, maybe people *would* like to get all their news in these forms. The *Haiku Daily News* or the *Limerick Law Review* would probably go over extremely well.

That's because there is comfort in knowing ahead of time the configuration of the path you are about to go down and how you will get to the end, even if you have no idea what information you will gather along the way. In a haiku, the syllable count orients you. In a limerick, you get your bearings by the meter and the pattern of the rhyme. In a listicle the numbers mark the trail; you know how many items there will be, and you tick them off one by one as you go.

Compared to the haiku and limerick, the listicle form is gloriously underspecified. The number of items on the list could be a nice round ten, an arbitrary 36, or an intimidating 97. The items themselves could be quotations, complaints, stories, names, or pictures. In terms of subject matter, while the prototypical haiku evokes nature and the limerick leans bawdy, there are a number of classic subgenres for the listicle: the "best of" list, the "worst of" list, the "helpful hints" list, the "mistakes you might be making" list, the "reasons why" list.

The true essence of the list form is consecutive order, taking a mass of stuff and finding a way to break it into pieces and lay it out in a line. That also happens to be, in a way, the essence of language. Thoughts come in layered clouds of impressions and ideas. Information is an undifferentiated pile, a mountain of facts and anecdotes. But when we speak or write, word must follow word, clause follow clause. Something has to come first, and something has to come after that.

The necessary linearity of language imposes a struggle. To express ourselves we must make choices about what comes next, and that can be difficult. Listing makes this process easier. We can gather the items we need into one place and set them in a line, without worrying too much about the significance of the ordering or the transition from one item to the next. It accomplishes the first task, of breaking the world down into pieces, and gives us maybe not *the* path but *a* path to follow through them. Lists may not lead us to a deeper understanding of the world, but they give us the reassuring sense that understanding is at least possible.

I don't remember when I first heard the word "listicle"—it has been around for at least ten years now—but I didn't realize until recently that it was formed from a blend of "list" and "article." I always interpreted it as referring to prose in popsicle form: vertically arranged, quickly consumed, not too nutritious, but fun. That seems to me much more evocative than plain old "list article."

But the etymology of "article" reveals some other shades of meaning that are also in play for the listicle. "Article" comes from the Latin *articulus*, which in turn comes from a joining of *artus*, or joint, with the diminutive suffix *culus*. *Articulus*, little joint, could be a finger or limb, and by extension a part, subdivision, point in time, juncture, critical moment, or section. It eventually came to stand for a short piece of nonfiction writing. If an article is one joint or limb on the body of knowledge, then a listicle is a display of outstretched, numbered fingers encouraging the hope that whatever is out there, no matter how messy or complicated, we might be able to grasp the whole thing in our hands at once.

Would you prefer to grasp this whole thing at once? I'll conclude by offering these compact versions of this very article for your comfort:

List of reasons why
people like restricted forms:
world overwhelming

A lady assembled a listicle
To give interesting facts a receptacle.

Lists make the world neater
For many a reader
(But this is a limerick so ... testicle).

Eight fun facts about the listicle

1. A listicle is an article in the form of a list.
2. It is kind of like a haiku or a limerick.
3. It has comforting structure.
4. It makes pieces.
5. It puts them in an order.
6. Language does that too.
7. Sometimes with great difficulty.
8. Lists make it look easier.

Arika Okrent, PhD'04, is a contributor to Mental Floss and the Week, and the author of In the Land of Invented Languages (Spiegel and Grau, 2009). She received a joint PhD in linguistics and the Department of Psychology's cognition and cognitive neuroscience program at the University. She has also earned her first-level certification in Klingon. Okrent lives in Philadelphia. For more information about her (and her homemade bagel recipe), visit rikaokrent.com.

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