

Chapter 1 The List

The first thinking framework in this book is listing. I've chosen the humble act of listing for the first chapter because it's so familiar. We all recognise lists when we see them or do them. So I'll start with something we all know well in order to establish some basics. Then, in later chapters, I can refer back to this shared experience and use it to talk about less familiar frameworks for thinking.

List thinking

We sit down at a table or a computer. We focus on a particular topic. We pull things out of our mental store and record them, often one under the other, often unprioritised. As we think of an item, it may well trigger the memory of other related items. So as we remember "bread" for our shopping list, this may well trigger "butter" and "marmalade" for one person (thinking about breakfast). For another, (thinking about carbohydrates or staple foods) it might trigger "rice", and "pasta". Some people making lists will think so quickly that they can only just keep up by scribbling things down as the ideas come tumbling into mental view. Other people will, as items come to mind, be able to place them more calmly, top or bottom, left or right, on the piece of paper depending on a mental system they have for importance or chronological time. Thus "rice" could go at the top of a shopping list for its importance in a meal or because it is located in the first aisle in the market. Or the lister might leave a big space and put it at the bottom because the rice shop is on the way out of town and so comes last.

"List thinking" is a bit like seizing a bag with a particular label on it, in this case "food shopping", and turning it upside down so that things fall out and you can see what you've got or, in this case, what you haven't got.

Some people write lists before they go shopping and others don't. Some people remember to take the lists with them and to look at them while they shop. Others either leave them at home by mistake or forget to consult them when they are in the shop. Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe for some people just doing the list thinking itself is what matters.

In the shopping list we have an example of a "to get" list. I suppose we could call it a "wish list" rather like the letter lists that children write to Santa Claus. "Dear Father Christmas, I would like a pony, a dog, a tractor, a"

"To get" lists are one of many, many kinds of lists that people use, enjoy, and torture themselves with. So, if you have been thinking, "I don't do lists", just hang on a minute and see if you have ever done any of the ones coming up.

Kinds of listing

There are many different types of lists in use. I'll mention a few.

▪ "To do" lists

On Saturday or Sunday, I often do some list thinking of a "what do I have to do this coming week?" kind. Down the left hand side of a sheet of A5 paper I write the days of the week. Next, I write in the things that I have to do on a certain day. Finally, on the right hand side of the paper, I write down the things I have to do at some point during the week although it doesn't matter when.

M		
T	choir	
W		Magazine dummy to Print
Th		Unit
F		
S	riding lesson 1.10	
S		

I've seen evidence of mixed "to do" and "to be" list thinking too.

TO DO

- Lose weight
- Pick up dry cleaning
- Buy spuds
- Be more assertive
- Drink less
- Find meaning of life

▪ "What have we done today?" lists

In the Introduction to this book, I mentioned the friend who does this kind of backwards thinking or memory collection on holiday. A relative of mine used to encourage her children to

do this kind of list thinking every evening. She would settle into a low chair by her daughter's bunk bed. She'd ask, "All snuggled in?" "Yep", her daughter would say. She was a 7-year old in flannel pyjamas, wide-awake as yet. "Tell me something", says the mother, invoking the old routine. "What sort of something?" says the daughter, who knows the game well and likes it. "Tell me your day then." "OK. Well, I met Tyler on the way to school and we had double math this morning." "Double? Yikes!" says the mother. And so it went nearly every night. The daughter told the mother her day and slowly the mother learned how her daughter saw the world and her own experiences in it. Such a nice way to be a family, the mother remembers. Until the day years later in a car when she said to her daughter, companionably, "Tell me something", hoping to invoke the old routine. "No! I'm not going to tell you anything. Why should I?" said the daughter snappily. End of game. For a while.

Most people play versions of the "what have we done today" list with people they live with, often in the evening on returning home. I suppose telling someone your day is a kind of thinking that allows, through recounting, for recognition, insight, perspective, humour and relaxation. There are other versions of "what have we done" too, like the ones some families in the UK and USA make in round robin Christmas letters to friends telling of all the adventures family members have had that year.

"And Zeezee has finally got rid of the braces on her teeth and has grown to 5'7."

Another use of the "what have I done?" list is the Curriculum Vitae for when applying for a job.

▪ **"To take" lists**

A friend of mine does some "to take" list thinking before going on a holiday. "Sun cream, sun glasses, swim suit, postcard addresses, passport, insurance" she chants out loud as she moves around the house gathering things and packing.

And John told me last week that he has lists of all his CDs and that they are alphabetised, so The Drifters come before The Eagles. "Sad, isn't it?" he said, when discussing his "what have I got" list.

So we have list thinking of "to get", "to do", "what I've done", "to take", and "I have" kinds. The sorts of "we have" lists we see around us are many; catalogues for public auctions, menus in restaurants, lists of plants in nursery catalogues, and back lists of books published a long time ago yet still available.

Mma Holonga, a rich business woman in Botswana, let it be known she was looking for a suitable husband. Out of the 20 phone calls she received, she ended up with a list of four possible men.

"You do not think it strange to have a list, Mma?" she asked Mma Ramotswa.

"I think it is a good idea to have a list. What is the difference between a list of things to buy at a shop, or a list of things to do and a list of men? I do not see the difference" answered Mma Ramotswa. (From Alexander McCall Smith's novel, 2003— pp.41-2.)

▪ **"To be" lists**

"To be" lists are all about striving for perfection. They were very popular in Victorian times. Books were written then about how women should deport themselves. These were basically

“to be” lists. For example, “Be kind to others”, “Keep your voice well modulated”, “Do not stare”. I suppose that is evidence of list thinking with a particular social code behind it.

▪ Old lists

As we’d expect there are some very old lists indeed. In *The Bible*, in the first book of Kings, Chapter 6, we have verse after verse of the measurements, materials, and ornamentation of Solomon’s temple: “The length thereof was threescore cubits and the breadth thereof twenty cubits. And the porch before the temple of the house...” Also in *The Bible*, in Exodus, Chapter 20, is a list of essential social behaviours from “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” down to “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife”. We’re into moral lists here. Would it be blasphemy or an interesting exercise to write our **own** lists of ten commandments? Our own moral codes? Whichever, these ancient lists are proof that this kind of thinking has been around for a long time.

▪ “Who’s better than who” lists

I noticed, in the year 2003, that the UK had an obsession with Top 100 lists. We had magazines and radio and TV programmes full of the 100 best musicals, best sportsmen, best sitcoms, best TV moments, best films, best singles tunes Mary Sieghart of the Times (Dec 17 2003) finds this kind of collection, selection, or “whimsical ranking” pretty ridiculous. She sees the items on the lists as all good but in different ways. She also thinks this is more of a male than a female way of thinking. “Many of my men friends ... love poring over football and cricket statistics In adolescence, they drew up lists of the girls they had snogged, with marks out of ten in the margin.” She feels that “... most of our female readers proba-

bly couldn’t care less whether *Gone with the Wind* beat *Apocalypse Now* or vice versa”. Women, she feels, will pore over **useful** rankings such as school league tables or Which? guides to the best dishwashers because these are based on real criteria and have direct practical relevance if your kids are moving from primary to secondary school or if your dishwasher has just packed up. The criteria of usefulness would explain Mma Ramotswe’s approval of the list of potential husbands made by Mma Holonga above! Sieghart speculates that thinking about a particular set of things and then ranking them by dubious criteria is either about attempting to feel in control or is perhaps an emotional outlet.

It seems then that prioritised or ranked lists can provoke pretty strong feelings pro or anti!

▪ Short lists of three items

Feelings are also stirred by a little pattern that turns up in politician’s speeches and other texts designed to persuade and which involves a short list of three items. Tony Blair, the then incoming Labour Prime Minister, when asked what his priorities in government would be, replied, “Education, education, education”. There is something that we like about this “Hickory, Dickory, Dock” tripartite construction. Apparently, we are much more likely to applaud enthusiastically in response when we are drawn along a particular rhetorical path by three-part lists than by two-, or more than three-, part lists!

“Here for instance, is a three part list identified ... in a speech by Margaret Thatcher to the 1980 Conservative conference: Soviet Marxism is ideologically, politically, and morally bankrupt.” (Mercer 2000 p 74)

There is something we like about this cohesive device that, as Mercer explains, signals its own completion even while it's being built.

It seems then, from the 7 or 8 list types noted above, that lists abound. Do they all **mean** the same though?

The meanings of lists

Although the processes of thinking about different kinds of lists may seem pretty similar, give or take the odd sprinkling of rank, morality, or persuasiveness depending on the type of list we come up with, the meanings or connotations of the different kinds of listing can be extremely varied. Different lists, as we have seen above, evoke different feelings.

Class registers and passenger lists, for checking present and missing people against, can bring relief or anxiety. Lists of expenses can mean you get your money back. 'Top Ten' lists, if you're in them, can mean you're rich and famous but can have outsiders screaming either, "Oh! Who's going to be number one?" or "Oh! Who cares!". Lists of action points in meeting minutes can be scanned to find out just how busy you're supposed to be.

<u>Action to be taken</u>	<u>by whom</u>	<u>by when</u>
---------------------------	----------------	----------------

Contact all reps	TW	Yesterday
Co-ordinate sales meetings	TW	"
Circulate everything	TW	"
Organise rock festival	TW	"

TW. "Oh, hell!"

And occupation short lists can mean you might get the job.

The look of lists and where they live

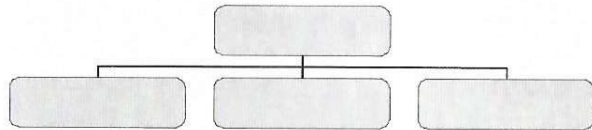
Just as the meaning of lists can differ so can their appearance. The visual representation of list thinking, that is, the lists themselves, can look very different from each other.

They can look like this:

or this:

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

or this:



—which we normally think of as a family tree or a list of family members—

or this:

-----, -----, -----, and -----
-----,

which represents a list of events, otherwise known as a story;

or this:

```

xxxxxxx          xxxxxxxxxxxx
xxxxxxxxxxxxx

          xxxxxxxx          xxxxxxxxxxxx

xxxxxxx    xxxxxxxx          xxxxxxxxxxxx
  
```

—a scattered list of unprioritised ideas otherwise known as a brainstorm.

Visible lists, the external evidence of thinking that searches and gathers and ranks and pulls out of the mind, may be found on fridge doors, people’s palms, post-it slips, pink paper, in your mind’s eye, or on the ceiling above your bed. Most people’s lives contain them in some form. Even those who start off saying, “I never write lists”, generally concede that in fact they either do the thinking behind them or betray occasional tangible evidence of this thinking when they consider all the different types of lists above. There is even a web site for an internet magazine about lists at www.todolistmagazine.com. On the site it says, “*To Do List* is a magazine about nothing and everything, ...that offers a glimpse into other peoples’ everyday lives.” In it you can read people’s lists of past boyfriends, deepest regrets, allowed foods, best salons, etc.

Why do we do this kind of thinking?

Why do we make lists in our head and on paper or on screens? The people who’ve answered that question for me have said, “It’s like:

taking a deep breath, getting my thoughts in order, forcing myself to consider alternatives, a secret vice I can’t give up, an inspiration to become the person I want to be, a constant source of guilt, a good way of postponing things, a way of getting difficult things outside me and onto paper, a way of focusing when I feel overwhelmed, a way of seeing how my life is running, a fast way of writing a diary, a good way of learning and memorising”.

(Learning and memorizing? Hmmm, let's think about that ...

"Two times two is four, Two times three is six ..."

"*Amo, amas, amat ...*"

Yes, all that saying out loud of lists, chanting, clapping, rocking, seems to din things in until one item in the chant starts to trigger the next item in the list, almost effortlessly, almost inevitably, ...

"two fours are eight, two fives are ..."

Using this kind of thinking inventively

Some people are very inventive in the way they dream up their lists and then use them. Here are a few dodges people have told me about. There are those who ...

- Write some things they've already done onto new 'to do' lists so they can have the joy of crossing them off again
- Write pleasures such 'eat strawberries' or 'listen to a radio play' onto a "to do" list to make sure they remember to enjoy themselves
- Transfer old, undone items onto new lists so that they can carry items like 'find the meaning of life' with them for years without actually doing anything about them
- Give themselves a really high quota for the number of ideas to be listed (e.g. 30 ideas under the heading "Ways of using that space under the stairs in my house") so that they are forced past the old ruts in their thinking and into new, more interesting alternatives

- Tick things off, cross things through, fold or shred the paper, turn the paper over and start a new list, or save their lists.
- Keep their lists over decades so they can see how much or how little their lives have changed.

<u>1980 list</u>	<u>1990 list</u>	<u>2004 list</u>
------------------	------------------	------------------

Jo's baby oil and nappies	pens for Jo's new term	cheque for Jo wine
vitamins	wine	vitamins

And other people I haven't met because they're far from me in time or space have used lists in equally inventive ways.

The writer of the 12th-century, Japanese *Pillow Book of Sei* made lists of unusual content such as, "awkward things", "pretty things", and "embarrassing things". One of Leonardo da Vinci's favourite thinking techniques apparently, according to Michalko (1998), was to list the distinctions in something. (So, for the face, this might be Heads, Eyes, Noses, Mouths, Chins, and so on.) He would then list variations under each one. (So under 'Chins' he might write 'receding', 'double', etc.) Next, he would experiment with the thousands of possible variations available if you mix and match the different kinds of head, eyes, nose, mouth and chin in one face. In short, da Vinci used the mixing and matching of different items under various lists as an ideas generation device. This is such a powerful idea that we'll come back to it in a later chapter.

Diarists use lists a lot. *The New Diary* by Tristine Reiner mentions Puritans who made lists of their moral transgres-

sions "Adding them up at the end of the week, the month and the year..." I wonder what they did then, once they'd got the total?

Benjamin Franklin apparently made lists of the 13 virtues he resolved to acquire, such as temperance, frugality and cleanliness, and he kept a graph of his poor progress on each virtue.

Marion Milner had remarkably positive results when she decided to keep on-going lists of all the things she desired and all the things she observed that made her genuinely happy. For seven years she made lists of her desires and joys, gradually teaching herself about her own happiness and the ways she could achieve it.

Tristine Reiner makes interesting mention too of diarists who have listed things that irritate them and others who've listed beliefs they have discarded or still have.

So, searching our knowledge and memory store, pulling things out and making lists is the type of thinking in our first framework. I've chosen it because it's familiar to us all. We use the list because we think we are organized or because we know we are not. This type of thinking helps us to plan our actions, to look back, prioritise, postpone and consolidate. How can we use this versatile framework to give ourselves mental exercise? Well, we could use it to learn about our own happiness and how to achieve it. We could use it to tickle both sides of our brain at once. For if sequences and linearity are intellectual functions connected more with the left (cerebral) hemisphere, and if the right (cerebral) hemisphere seems to be dominant in rhythm, space and colour, then to tickle both hemispheres at once, we could chant our lists, write them in colour, illustrate them, or sing them like jazz We could use them to find out

what we once believed and what we believe now, or, by swapping lists, sneak a peep into other people's everyday realities. We could try some of the more inventive uses of the list mentioned in this chapter. Listing what makes you happy seems a good one to start with. Marion Milner was definitely onto something.

Like all thinking frameworks, however, lists need to be used well and kept in their place. If we let lists dominate us, haunting us with visions of items unticked, and uncrossed ... spoiling our tomorrows with the pressure of unfinishable chores, then maybe it's best to try and kick the habit or change it to a more positive style, if we can.

Let's see, how many habits have I kicked?

Smoking,

Biting my fingernails

Asking too many questions

Oops, I just started listing again. It's a compulsion!