Improving Parish Communications
Parish Bulletins: *Part 2 Formatting*

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While the most significant aspect of bulletins and newsletters is content, it is equally important that the content be delivered in a professional attractive manner. The look of the bulletin delivers – both to the parishioner and to the first time visitor -- a sense that all in this parish is in good order.

Of the bulletins we receive at least half look great. Neat. Orderly. Organized. The other half could use some improvement. In today's world people *expect* written communications to look professional and crisp. While limited computer and word processing skills are likely the root causes of sloppy bulletins, "I don't know how" is no longer a valid excuse for ugly documents.

Here are some suggestions. There is plenty of room for opposing opinions on this. If you don't have time to read this here it is in a nutshell – *"less is more".*

White Space

As with many websites a number of the bulletins that we see can fairly be described as cluttered. Two words – white space!

Some suggestions:

- **Spacing After Line** - Use the format/paragraph tool (see box at right) to apply a bit of space after the end of the last line of a paragraph (as we have done in this document.) It gives the effect of adding a small space after a paragraph – making it easier to read. We omitted the spacing after this paragraph – see the difference? To get a clearer feel see the next page. We eliminated the spacing after all paragraphs.

No space here. Ugly!

- **Space Around Boxes** - When inserting graphics or text boxes leave reasonable *space* around the box – so that text doesn't bump up against it. The box insert at the right does *not* have enough space on the left side.   →

6 Pts of space here. Good!

- **Margins** - Use reasonably wide margins both at sides and between columns. Using two column designs is a good way to improve readability. However, we also notice there is a tendency to skimp on margins between columns. This results in an amateurish look. When using multiple columns it is, in our opinion, better to use block text (justifying both left and right side) to get a clean look in the center margin.
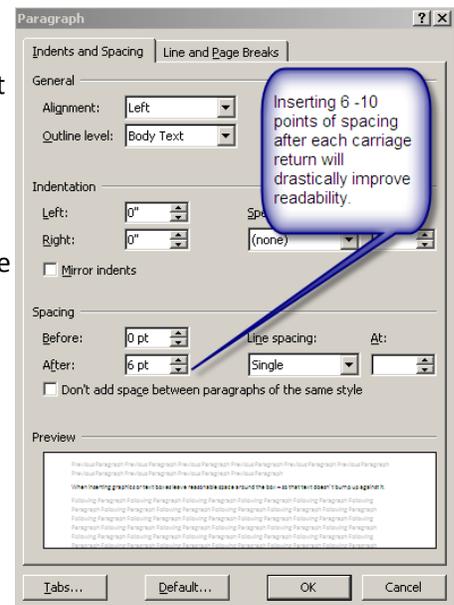
Too Many Font's and Emphasis Tools

One bulletin we received had thirteen fonts, nine text sizes, six text colors, numerous emphasis tools: bold, underline italic - often used to_get_**her,** text boxes with four line thicknesses, three background colors, left justified followed by center justified headlines, *and much more!*

Obviously this confuses and "visually overdoses" the reader and the message gets overwhelmed by *gadgets*.

Here are some suggested rules.

Does this page look cluttered to you? We think so.
It mimics some bulletins.
(Why is this box a different font? Why is the line so heavy?)

- **Limit Fonts** - Try to limit yourself to *two fonts,* three if you're careful and, we'd say four at the absolute max! Five – you'd better have some training – and some good reasons.

- **Usage Rules** - Establish clear "rules" for when you will use these fonts. Perhaps you'll want to use "lighter"/less serious fonts or italicized text for parish social news and more formal fonts to set off liturgical texts. Inconsistent use of fonts etc is as bad – check that -- *worse* than overuse.

- **Headlines: Serif; Body Text: Sans Serif** - Most standards guides suggest using a serif font (a font with detailing at the end of the letter (ala Times New Roman) for headlines (like we've done in this document-- the headings use a serif font.) Use "sans serif" ("without serif"/detailing) fonts for body text. (Like this -- "arial or tahoma"). Sans serif fonts tend to look more modern, younger, fresher and less formal. Use any other font in a <u>very</u> limited manner -- for very specific special emphasis -- perhaps to set off a biblical quotation shown in a text box.

WORD OF GOD, HE WAS STANDING BY THE
E FISHERMEN HAD GONE OUT OF THEM AND
WAS SIMON'S, HE ASKED HIM TO PUT OUT A
OM THE BOAT. AND WHEN HE HAD CEASED
YOUR NETS FOR A CATCH." AND SIMON AN-
UR WORD I WILL LET DOWN THE NETS." AND
AND AS THEIR NETS WERE BREAKING, THEY
HEM. AND THEY CAME AND FILLED BOTH THE
, HE FELL DOWN AT JESUS' KNEES, SAYING,
ONISHED, AND ALL THAT WERE WITH HIM, AT
AND JOHN SONS OF ZEBEDEE WHO WERE

- <u>**Don't Mix Emphasis Tools**</u> - Most graphical standards recommend that you never **<u>bold and underline text</u>**. Use **bold** or <u>underline</u>. In our opinion underlining works well to emphasize <u>body text</u> but not in headlines. The bullet label in this paragraph does not need to be underlined.

- **Limit "All Caps"** - ALL CAPS IS HARD TO READ IN PARAGRAPH FORM. BEST LEFT FOR HEADLINES/HEADERS -- WITHOUT BOLD OR UNDERLINE. USE THIS EFFECT RARELY IF EVER. See example at right.

- **Boxes et al** - Many of you seem to just love to put boxes around headlines. You might get the same effect in a more pleasing way with a line above or below the text. (Not an underscore --a line – there is a difference.) Or better yet do neither. If you must use boxes make the lines thin. Thick lines look heavy and are distracting. Filled boxes with thick lines and obverse text are fun but are often a "clutter culprit".

- **Limit Text Sizes** - Be careful also with text sizes. Arial 8 can get tough to see. Varying sizes detracts from the message. Hopefully you realize that the same size of different fonts like arial verdana, calibri and times new roman have vastly different readability.

Upcoming Event
May 25-28 - St. Tikhon's 103rd An
May 25-28 - Annunciation Annual G
May 27 - Pentecost

- **Use Bullets – But Keep Them Simple!** - *Not* like the ones above right. Clever bullets create clutter and make it difficult to print from a different computer or to read the document after emailing. Even more important however, we see lots of "lists" *without* bullets. As a certified bullet freak we ask why? Some of you insist on typing your own bullets. Find the bullet tool and use it. →

- **Use Styles**. Most word processing programs have tools called "styles". They save time AND improve readability. Most of us learn and use only a bare minimum set of capabilities in any software – but understanding and applying styles can be worth the small effort to learn.

- **Special Effects / Clip Art** - Be careful about the use of special effects such as word art or (non-ecclesial) clip art. Unless you are very good and discrete this tends to make things look cute. In our opinion these devices work better for secular communications – not a church. If used try to keep them in the (hopefully) small portion of the bulletin dealing with the most mundane of parish business.

- **Out of date Info/Proof Reading** - Most of us hate to proof read – this author leads the way -- but proofing truly helps to avoid embarrassment. More importantly, as we use learn to *copy and paste* from one week or tone to another it is (apparently) easy to generate out of date info. Typos are usually recognizable and harmless– publishing last week's hymns is a more potent error.

We have to admit we're often a bit overly sensitive about formatting issues -- but hopefully you can find something from the above to be helpful. If nothing else writing this has been truly cathartic for the author!

If you have further suggestions on improving bulletin content or look and feel please feel free to contact us at parishfacilitator@midwestdiocese.org

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