



[Home](#) » [Entertainment](#)

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Lists to live by

We like them because: 1. They're useful 2. They're easy 3. They're fun

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It's the time of year in which lists rule, with all media extrapolating who's naughty and who's nice, what's in and what's out.

Add to that the ubiquitous top 10 lists of best movies, books, albums, beautiful people, highest-paid athletes, even vacation spots, and it makes sense that readers could become a little, well, listless.

Except for Gail Kaske of Thiensville. She loves lists.

"I try to keep it real, as my kids used to tell me," said the fiftysomething mother of two grown children.

Real and detailed is more like it. Kaske color-codes her grocery list (blue stands for frozen foods). She uses a small tape recorder to help her remember what to write on her list. She writes in her free time.

"I'm a visual learner. I need to see things written down, in order," she said.

Kaske brushes off the mocking her children make of her many lists (her daughter recommended her for this story). The former teachers aide has an additional motive for her method of organization:

"I do get a certain sense of accomplishment looking at it at the end of the week."

The satisfaction of checking off a completed goal is one reason we like lists. Our top 10 other reasons are, ahem, listed below:

1- Lists are easy, said Erik Samdahl, a marketing director in Seattle and chief list-maker at movie Web site www.FilmJabber.com.

2 - List-making is embedded in our DNA.

For centuries, mothers have coerced children with a count of three. That, my friends, is a list, said Elaine Fantle Shimberg, a Florida-based author and medical writer.

3 - Lists are good for us.

"They literally, biologically and neurologically make us feel good," said Mary Jo Barrett, executive director and co-founder of the Center for Contextual Change Ltd., in Chicago. "A list can make both your left and your right side of the brain work."

4 - Lists help make sense of chaos.

"We're coming out of a disorganized time. People are feeling overwhelmed. Lists simplify things," said Caroline Adams Miller, a life coach and speaker based in Washington, D.C.

5 - Lists help us stay positive by helping us remember details.

"People feel bad when they forget. They feel stupid, they feel old, like there's something wrong with their brain," Barrett said.

6 - Lists help us achieve goals.

"When you write a list of goals of projects, you check for goals in conflict," Miller said. When you have conflicting goals - 'I want to lose weight, but I also want to join a gourmet club,' for instance - you don't make progress on either one.

7 - Lists conjure action.

"A priority ranking can evoke controversy, opinion and discussion. If I say 'The Love Guru' is the best movie of the year (which it's not), that's going to get people talking, complaining or agreeing. If I just say, 'Here are some good movies,' but don't provide a ranking, there's very little to react to," said Samdahl.

8 - Lists - think "Bucket List" - can make us feel younger.

"You should never stop having that childlike appreciation for what we can go after," Miller said.

9 - Lists are satisfying.

"People can feel in control, get some sense of mastery and some value from crossing things off a list," Barrett said.

10 - Lists are infinite.

Said Shimberg, "Unlike ideas, we never run out of numbers."

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