

## Parallel Structure

Parallel structure means using the same pattern of words to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance.

Parallel construction requires that expressions of similar content and function should be outwardly similar. The likeness of form enables the reader to recognize more readily the likeness of content and function.

Parallel (grammatically equal) sentence elements regularly appear in lists or in a series, in compound structures, in comparisons using *than* or *as*, and in contrasted elements. Words, phrases, clauses, and whole series of sentences within paragraphs can be parallel. For parallel structure, balance nouns with nouns, prepositional phrases with prepositional phrases, main clauses with main clauses, and so on--in one paper, whole paragraphs can parallel other paragraphs.

In much current business and technical writing, you'll see parallel lists of points indented and bulleted, while rhetoricians from Lincoln to Martin Luther King used parallel constructions to create emotional suspense in their speeches. Writers depend upon parallelism because it (1) creates an easy information flow, (2) enables the writer to make points concisely, and (3) serves to emphasize points.

1. Use parallel structure with elements joined by coordinating conjunctions.
2. Use parallel structure with elements in lists or in a series.
3. Use parallel structure with elements being compared. (**X** is *more than / better than* **Y**)
4. Use parallel structure with elements joined by a linking verb or a verb of being.
5. Use parallel structure with elements joined by a correlative conjunction.

### Parallel Structure in Lists

The items in the list must be all nouns, all infinitives, all prepositional phrases, all gerunds, or all clauses.

#### Incorrect:

- Prepared weekly field payroll
- Material purchasing, expediting, and returning
- Recording OSHA regulated documentation
- Change orders
- Maintained hard copies of field documentation

#### Correct:

- Prepared weekly field payroll
- Handled material purchasing, expediting, and returning
- Recorded OSHA regulated documentation
- Processed change orders
- Maintained hard copies of field documentation

### Lists after a colon

Be sure to keep all the elements in a list in the same form.

#### Example 1

**Not Parallel:** The dictionary can be used for these purposes: to find *word meanings*, *pronunciations*, *correct spellings*, and *looking up irregular verbs*.

**Parallel:** The dictionary can be used for these purposes: to find *word meanings*, *pronunciations*, *correct spellings*, and *irregular verbs*.

By this principle, an article or a preposition applying to all the members of a series must either be used only before the first term or else be repeated before each term.

The French, the Italians, Spanish, and Portuguese  
The French, the Italians, the Spanish, and the Portuguese

In spring, summer, or in winter  
In spring, summer, or winter (In spring, in summer, or in winter)

**Correlative conjunctions** also require parallel structure:

Both **X** and **Y** . . .

Not **X** but **Y**

Not only **X** but also **Y** . . .

Neither **X** nor **Y** . . .

Either **X** or **Y** . . .

a time not for words but action

a time not for words but for action

**Not Parallel:**

Either you must grant her request or incur her ill will.

**Parallel:**

You must either grant her request or incur her ill will.

**Not Parallel:**

My objections are first, the injustice of the measure, and second, that it is unconstitutional.

**Parallel:**

My objections are first, that the measure is unjust, and second, that it is unconstitutional.

**Correlative expressions** should be followed by the same grammatical construction. Many violations of this rule can be corrected by rearranging the sentence.

The hurricane not only **destroyed the fishing fleet** but also **the homes of the fishermen.**

The hurricane destroyed not only **the fishing fleet** but also **the homes of the fishermen**

In this case, the verb "destroyed" cannot balance the noun "homes." The sentence should be rewritten so that "destroyed" appears before "not only" and so *nouns* follow both connectors.

The storm front was moving either **east through Minneapolis** or **northeast through Duluth.**

It was both a long ceremony and very tedious.

The ceremony was both long and tedious.

A time not for words, but action

A time not for words, but for action

Either you must grant his request or incur his ill will.

You must either grant his request or incur his ill will.

My objections are, first, the injustice of the measure; second, that it is unconstitutional.

My objections are, first, that the measure is unjust; second, that it is unconstitutional.

## Other examples of parallel structure

### Words and Phrases

#### With the -ing form (gerund) of words:

Parallel: Mary likes *hiking*, *swimming*, and *bicycling*.

#### With infinitive phrases:

Parallel: Mary likes *to hike*, *to swim*, and *to ride* a bicycle.

OR

Mary likes to *hike*, *swim*, and *ride* a bicycle.

(**Note:** You can use "to" before all the verbs in a sentence or only before the first one.)

### Do not mix forms.

#### Example 1

**Not Parallel:** Mary likes *hiking*, *swimming*, and *to ride* a bicycle.

**Parallel:** Mary likes *hiking*, *swimming*, and *riding* a bicycle.

#### Example 2

**Not Parallel:** The production manager was asked to write his report *quickly*, *accurately*, and *in a detailed manner*.

**Parallel:** The production manager was asked to write his report *quickly*, *accurately*, and *thoroughly*.

#### Example 3

**Not Parallel:** The teacher said that he was a poor student because he *waited* until the last minute to study for the exam, *completed* his lab problems in a careless manner, and *his motivation was* low.

**Parallel:** The teacher said that he was a poor student because he *waited* until the last minute to study for the exam, *completed* his lab problems in a careless manner, and *lacked* motivation.

## Clauses

A parallel structure that begins with clauses must keep on with clauses. Changing to another pattern or changing the voice of the verb (from active to passive or vice versa) will break the parallelism.

### Example 1

**Not Parallel:** The coach told the players *that they should get* a lot of sleep, *that they should not eat* too much, and *to do* some warm-up exercises before the game.

**Parallel:** The coach told the players *that they should get* a lot of sleep, *that they should not eat* too much, and *that they should do* some warm-up exercises before the game.

-- or --

**Parallel:** The coach told the players that they should *get* a lot of sleep, not *eat* too much, and *do* some warm-up exercises before the game.

### Example 2

**Not Parallel:** The salesman expected *that he would present* his product at the meeting, *that there would be* time for him to show his slide presentation, and *that questions would be asked* by prospective buyers.  
(passive)

**Parallel:** The salesman expected *that he would present* his product at the meeting, *that there would be* time for him to show his slide presentation, and *that prospective buyers would ask* him questions.

Some words require that certain **prepositions** precede them. When such words appear in parallel structure, it is important to **include all of the appropriate prepositions**, since the first one may not apply to the whole series of items.

There are trains leaving the station in the morning and noon.  
There are trains leaving the station **in** the morning and **at** noon.

The cancer researcher is interested and excited about the new advances in medical technology.  
The cancer researcher is **interested in** and **excited about** the new advances in medical technology.

The first sentences in the following examples give the impression that the writer is undecided or timid, afraid to **choose one form of expression and stick with it**. The second sentences in each series give the impression that the writer is at least confident enough to make a choice and keep to it.

Students spend their time going to classes, studying, working, and they wish they had time for a social life.

Students spend their time going to classes, studying, working, and wishing for a social life.

By the end of the quarter they're exhausted, irritable, and have learned a lot.

By the end of the quarter they're exhausted, irritable and smarter.

BCC students hope for early registration dates, and close-in parking spaces are important, too.

BCC students hope for early registration dates and close-in parking spaces.

Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method, while now the laboratory method is employed.

Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method; now it is taught by the laboratory method.

**A.** Read the following sentences. If the sentence is correct, don't change anything. If the sentence is incorrect, find the parallel structure problem and fix it.

1. The factory workers were ready, able, and were quite determined to do a great job.
2. The computer network is safer, stronger, and more secure.
3. We cannot be worried or terrified of difficulties in life.
4. The actor taught his student how to read, how to stand, how to cry, and to talk with fans.
5. The requirements for a chemistry degree are not as strict as a medical degree.
6. Either you can join the army or the navy.
7. The reorganization of the company is neither simple nor it will be cheap.
8. When I was in high school, I learned piano and how to play the guitar.
9. Fred supports the idea because, first, its simplicity; second, it is unique.
10. They are either our friends or they are not.

**B. Correct the nonparallel elements in the following sentences:**

1. She was healthy, wealthy, and a regular reader of my column.
2. He was handsome, brave, and the sort of person who would do anything for you.
3. The Budget Information System is a query system, the database is small, and we need to recognize the fact that the response time is unacceptably long.
4. Declining trees have a higher probability of branch failures and of dying prematurely.
5. In the facility construction stage, trees are often wounded by trenching, blacktopping, changing the grade, and heavy machinery.
6. Recreation users inflict many wounds by pounding nails into trees, lantern burns, and damaging their roots with vehicles and heavy equipment.

7. Declaring sustainability as a goal is one thing; putting it into operation has been an elusive goal.
8. The room was beautiful, the service impeccable, and I've never tasted better food in my entire life.
9. You are not only responsible for organizing the conference, but we also want you to introduce the keynote speaker.
10. To assess your effectiveness as a writer, consider whether your writing:
  1. Conveys your message with clarity, emphasis, precision, and style.
  2. Uses variety in sentence structure for good stylistic effect.
  3. Provides organized, coherent, logical, insightful development of the subject.
  4. Supports your main points with specific, detailed, compelling examples and illustrations.
  5. You commit no significant errors in grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation.

**C. Correct the following bulleted list from a final report.**

On the web page there is much wasted space, which is unappealing to the viewer. Following are suggestions for eliminating the unwanted blank space:

- Move some of the text into the blank space
- Centering the picture
- Centering the picture and add text to each side
- On the right of the picture, tell a little bit about the picture (who owns the balloon, what year and where this picture was taken, etc.)
- Have pictures that stretch the length of the screen, like with a panoramic camera
- Or as a last resort even take the picture out