

Parallel Structure

Parallel structure is a tool to create a series of words, phrases, clauses, or sentences with the same grammatical form. The pattern created by the series—its parallel structure—emphasizes the similarities or differences among the items, which may be things, qualities, actions, or ideas. Properly used, parallel structure is the mark of the sophisticated writer.

Consider the following sentences:

My favorite foods are roast beef, deep-dish apple pie, and linguine with clam sauce.
Louise is charming, witty, intelligent, and talented.
Jeff likes to swim, ride, and run.
Dave likes movies that scare him and books that make him laugh.

Each series is a perfect parallel construction, composed of equivalent words: nouns in the first example, adjectives in the second, verbs in the third, and adjective clauses in the fourth.

In a series linked by a coordinating conjunction, keep all elements in the same grammatical form.

Whenever you connect items with a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, nor, so, and yet), you cue the readers to expect a parallel structure. Whether your series consists of single words, phrases, or clauses, its parts should balance one another.

Awkward: The puppies are **tiny, clumsily bumping** into each other, and **cute**.

Two elements in this series are parallel one-word adjectives, but the third is a verb phrase. The writer can improve this awkward sentence by making the series consistent.

Parallel: The puppies are **tiny, clumsy, and cute**.

Do not mix verb forms in a series. Avoid, for instance, pairing a gerund and an infinitive.

Awkward: Switzerland is a good place for a winter vacation if you like **skiing** and **to skate**.

Parallel: Switzerland is a good place for a winter vacation if you like **skiing** and **skating**.

Parallel: Switzerland is a good place for a winter vacation if you like to ski and **to skate**.

In a series of phrases or clauses, be sure that all elements in the series are similar in form, even if they are not similar in length.

Awkward: The fight in the bar happens **after the two lovers have their scene together** but **before the car chase**. (The clause starting with “after” is not parallel to the phrase starting with “before.”)

Parallel: The fight in the bar happens **after the love scene but before the car chase**.

Editing Checklist: Keeping Parallel Structure

Are the elements in a series in the same grammatical form?

Are the elements in a comparison parallel in form?

Are articles, conjunctions, or prepositions between elements in a repeated series, rather than mixed?

In a series, are lead-in words repeated?

In a series linked by correlative conjunctions, keep all elements in the same grammatical form.

When you use a correlative conjunction (either...or, neither...nor, not only...but also), follow each part of the conjunction with a similarly structured word, phrase, or clause.

Awkward: I'm looking forward **to either attending** Saturday's wrestling match or **to seeing** it on close-circuit TV. (Parallel structure is violated because "to" precedes the first part of the correlative conjunction ("to either") but follows the second part ("to do")).

Parallel: I'm looking forward either **to attending** Saturday's wrestling match or **to seeing** it on closed-circuit television.

Awkward: Take my advice: try neither **to be the first** nor **last** in the lunch line. (Parallel structure is violated because "to be" follows the first part of the correlative conjunction but not the second part.)

Parallel: Take my advice: try to be neither **first** nor **last** in the lunch line.

Make the elements in a comparison parallel in form.

A comparative word such as *than* or *as* cues the reader to expect a parallel structure. This makes logical sense: to be compared, two things must resemble each other, and parallel structure emphasizes the resemblance.

Awkward: Philip likes **fishing** better than **to sail**.

Parallel: Philip likes **fishing** better than **sailing**.

Parallel: Philip likes **to fish** better than **to sail**.

Awkward: **Maintaining railway lines** is as important to our public transportation system **as to buy new trains**.

Parallel: **Maintaining railway lines** is as important to our public transportation system as **buying new trains**.

Reinforce parallel structure by repeating rather than mixing articles, conjunctions, or prepositions.

When you write a series involving articles, conjunctions, or prepositions, be consistent. Try to repeat rather to vary the word that begins each phrase or clause.

“The time has come,” the Walrus said,
“To talks of many things:
Of shoes-and ships-and sealing-wax-
Of cabbage-and-kings-”

In this famous rhyme from *Through the Looking-Glass*, Lewis Carroll builds a beautiful parallel structure of three of’s and three and’s, each followed by a noun. The repetition of preposition and conjunction makes clear the equivalence of the nouns.

Sometimes the same lead-in word will not work for all elements in a series. In such cases you may be able to preserve a parallel structure by changing the order of the elements to minimize variation.

Awkward: The new school building is **large but not very comfortable, and expensive, but unattractive.**

Parallel: The new school building is **large and expensive, but uncomfortable and unattractive.**

In a series of clauses, repeat lead-in words to emphasize parallel structure.

Parallel structures are especially useful in complex sentences expressing equivalent ideas. Whenever you write a sentence containing a series of long, potentially confusing clauses, try to precede each clause with that, who, when, where, or some other connective, repeating the same connective every time. To do so not only helps you keep your thoughts in order as you write but helps the readers to follow with ease. For example,

“The Russian dramatist is one who, walking through a cemetery, does not see the flowers on the graves. The American dramatist is one who, walking through a cemetery, does not see the graves under the flowers.”—George Jean Nathan