

Parallelism

Parallelism, or parallel structure, is when elements of a sentence or sentences share the same grammatical structure. Maintaining parallelism in your writing is important because it makes your writing more readable. In addition, parallelism can be used as a rhetorical device to give your prose more power.

Parallelism with Coordination

When listing words, phrases, or clauses in a series, it's important to ensure that each item in the series is grammatically similar.

- Do you like cats, dogs, rabbits, or birds better? (nouns in a series)
- We went to the store, bought groceries, came home, and cooked dinner. (verbs in a series)
- Our office is up the stairs, down the hall, and on the right. (prepositional phrases in a series)

Though this may seem straightforward, it is often overlooked, especially when the items in our series get more complex.

Non-Parallel:

Anne is a good listener, an effective problem solver, and she often thinks of other people. (two nouns and an independent clause)

Parallel:

Anne is a good listener, an effective problem solver, and a thoughtful person. (all nouns)

Parallelism with Correlation

When using correlative conjunctions (both...and, either...or, neither...nor, not only...but also), each part of the correlative should precede the same type of grammatical unit as the other.

- I like *both* pizza *and* ice cream. (two nouns)
- We will *either* see a movie *or* go to the zoo. (two verbs)
- The field trip was *neither* educational *nor* enjoyable. (two adjectives)

When correlative sentences do not employ parallelism, the meaning of the sentence can be obscured, and it might take a couple reads to understand it.

Non-Parallel:

The writing lab wants *not only* students to improve their essays *but also* to become better writers in general. (one noun and infinitive, one infinitive)

Parallel:

The writing lab wants students *not only* to improve their essays *but also* to become better writers in general. (two infinitives)

Parallelism with Lists

As with coordination and correlation, using parallelism is important whenever you make a list. It looks cleaner and also clarifies the purpose of the list. When writing a resumé it's important to list the things you can *do*, so each bullet in the list should be a strong *verb*. When writing a materials list for a grant proposal it's important to list the *things* you need, so each bullet in the list should be a *noun*.

Resumé example:

Head Waiter

- Train new waiters and floor staff
- Schedule waiters and floor staff
- Resolve conflicts with customers
- Supervise dining room

Grant proposal list example:

Materials needed:

- micropipettes
- test tubes
- electrophoresis gels
- poster board

Parallelism in Rhetoric

Aside from being grammatically correct and making your paper easier to read and understand, employing parallelism in your prose can give your writing a little extra punch.

Take these famous quotes for example:

- "Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter, and those who matter don't mind." — Bernard M. Baruch
- "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion." — Dalai Lama
- "We have petitioned and our petitions have been scorned. We have entreated and our entreaties have been disregarded. We have begged and they have mocked when our calamity came. We beg no longer. We entreat no more. We petition no more. We defy them." — William Jennings Bryan
- "...and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." — Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address
- "We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give." — Winston Churchill
- "I like pigs. Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals." — Winston Churchill (a prolific employer of parallelism)