Parallel Structure

Parallel structure uses the same pattern of words to show that two or more ideas in a sentence have an equal level of importance. Readers expect that a series of elements serving similar purpose will appear in parallel grammatical form. When a sentence is written in parallel form, it reads much more clearly and naturally. Parallel structures can occur at the word, phrase, or clause level.

Correcting Faulty Parallelism

The absence of parallelism is jarring and awkward to read. Consider this example:

_Not Parallel:_ The bowl was filled with _crisp apples, juicy oranges, and bananas that were ripe._

In _crisp apples_ and _juicy oranges_, the descriptive word comes first and the word being described comes second. In _bananas that were ripe_, the order is reversed. To achieve parallelism, give the nonparallel item the same form as the others:

_Parallel:_ The bowl was filled with crisp apples, juicy oranges, and _ripe bananas_.

Here are some additional examples:

_Not Parallel:_ My neighbor likes to _plant a garden, watering it_, and even to _weed it._

_To plant a garden_ and _to weed it_ are similar in construction. But watering it is not. For parallel construction, another _to_ is needed.

_Parallel:_ My neighbor likes to _plant a garden_, _to water it_, and even to _weed it._

_Not Parallel:_ The moviegoers _talked_ and _were rattling_ popcorn boxes during the film. _Talked_ is an _-ed_ construction, does not parallel _were rattling_. The problem could be corrected by changing either word group.

_Parallel:_ The moviegoers _talked_ and _rattled_ popcorn boxes during the film.

_Also parallel:_ The moviegoers _were talking_ and _were rattling_ popcorn boxes during the film.


Proofreading Strategies to try:

*Skim your paper, pausing at the words “and” and “or”. Check on each side of these words to see whether the items joined are parallel. If not, make them parallel.

*If you have several items in a list, put them in a column to see if they are parallel.

*Listen to the sound of the items in a list or the items being compared. Do you hear the same kinds of sounds? For example, is there a series of “-ing” words beginning each item? If something is breaking the rhythm or repetition of sound, check to see if it needs to be made parallel.

Proofreading Strategies to try: part of a collection of instructional materials used in the Purdue University Writing Lab. The online version is part of OWL (Online Writing Lab), a project of the Purdue University Writing Lab, fund by the School of Liberal Arts at Purdue. Purdue University Writing Lab 2001
Rowena began her work day by pouring a cup of coffee and checking her e-mail.

a. Police dogs are used for finding lost children, tracking criminals, and the detection of bombs and illegal drugs.

b. Hannah told her rock climbing partner that she bought a new harness and of her desire to climb Otter Cliffs.

c. It is more difficult to sustain an exercise program than starting one.

d. During basic training, I was not only told what to do but also what to think.

e. Jan wanted to drive to the wine country or at least Sausalito.

1. Activities on Wednesday afternoons include fishing trips, dance lessons, and computers.

2. Arriving at Lake Powell in a thunderstorm, the campers found it safer to remain in their cars than setting up their tents.

3. The streets were not only too steep but also were too narrow for anything other than pedestrian traffic.

4. More digital artists in the show are from the South Shore than the North Shore.

5. To load her toolbox, Anika the Clown gathered hats of different sizes, put in two tubes of face paint, arranged a bundle of extra-long straws, added a bag of colored balloons, and a battery-powered hair dryer.