

Parallelism

SUU Writing Center

(last revised 08/18/04)

Most information included in this tip sheet has been suggested by the following sources:

“Parallel Structure.” Online Writing Lab (OWL). Purdue University. 10 October 2003

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g_parallel.html.

Hacker, Diana. *Rules for Writers*. 2nd ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000. 110-114.

This tip sheet focuses on identifying and correcting parallel structure in academic writing.

What is parallelism? When do I use it?

<p>When making a list, you need to make sure that all the words running in that series match in their form. If you mix nouns and verbs or even kinds of verbs (for example “to eat” listed in a series with “taking a nap), your sentence will not be parallel. See the box at right for an example.</p> <p>How can the sentence be fixed? See the box at right for an example.</p>	<p>NOT parallel: My family and I went to Hawaii for Christmas and spent our time surfing, sunbathing, and on hikes.</p> <p><i>Explanation:</i> This sentence is not parallel. The item “on hikes” does not match the two –ing items.</p> <p>Parallel: My family and I went to Hawaii for Christmas and spent our time surfing, sunbathing, and hiking.</p>
<p>Another example shows that the infinitive verb form [to + verb] can be altered slightly. In the first corrected sentence, “to” precedes all the verbs. In the second corrected sentence, “to” precedes only the first verb. Both of these usages are correct.</p>	<p>NOT parallel: Barbra and her son love to fly kites, to bake cookies, and reading good books.</p> <p>Parallel: Barbra and her son love to fly kites, to bake cookies, and to read good books.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">OR</p> <p>Parallel: Barbra and her son love to fly kites, bake cookies, and read good books.</p>

How can I check for parallelism when I am proofreading my paper?

<p>A good rule of thumb when looking for parallelism is paying close attention to coordinating conjunctions (<i>and, but, or, nor, for, so, and yet</i>). Coordinating conjunctions are used in listing and therefore can help you spot faulty parallelism.</p> <p>Paying attention to the conjunction, “or” in the example in the right-hand box helps you spot that the first sentence is not parallel and helps you correct it in the second sentence.</p>	<p>Marcus does not enjoy taking tests or even to attend school.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">OR</p> <p>Marcus does not enjoy taking tests or even attending school.</p> <p><i>Explanation:</i> “to attend school” must be changed to match the gerund (–ing) form, “attending school.” Changing the verb form creates parallelism in the sentence.</p>
---	---

<p>Another way to check for parallelism is to look for colons. Colons usually precede items in a list. An example is shown at right.</p> <p>Spotting the colon helps identify the fact that the first example sentence about the United States is not parallel and can be fixed, as shown in the second example sentence.</p>	<p>NOT Parallel: The United States is known for its many great accomplishments: a monumental constitution, a democratic government, and offering economic opportunity.</p> <p>Parallel: The United States is known for its many great accomplishments: the creation of a monumental constitution, a democratic government, and economic opportunity.</p> <p><i>Explanation:</i> “offering” is verb form and is not parallel with “constitution” and “government,” both nouns. By adjusting the word class to noun, you can correct the problem.</p>
---	---

How do I balance parallel ideas?

<p>Be consistent in using question words (such as <i>who</i>, <i>what</i>, <i>when</i>, <i>where</i>, <i>why</i>, and <i>how</i>) in clauses or phrases joined by <i>and</i> or any of the other conjunctions</p> <p>Adding the “how” question word in the second example at right makes the sentence parallel and easier for a reader to understand.</p>	<p>NOT Parallel: My professor showed us what to research and to use online search engines.</p> <p>Parallel: My professor showed us what to research and how to use online search engines.</p>
---	---

Using parallel structure in your writing will improve your clarity and make your paper easier for your readers to understand. When you have a firm grip on parallelism, you can communicate your ideas more clearly and write for a more extensive audience.