



Parallelism and Emphasis

What is Parallelism?

Parallelism is putting similar ideas—pairs of items or items in a list—into identical grammatical and syntactical form. Nouns are matched with nouns, verbs with verbs, phrases with phrases, etc. For example:

- “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.” ~William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

The subjects in the first clause appear as a list, and each item in the list is a plural noun. The second clause contains a pair of actions which are once again both in the same form: the infinitive “to bury” balances the infinitive “to praise.” As this example shows, sentences that use parallelism effectively have an appealing rhythm and convey complex ideas with clarity.

When should a writer use parallel construction?

Writers should use parallel construction when they link parts of sentences using coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet) or correlative conjunctions (either/or, neither/nor, not only/but also, both/and, whether/or) or when they compare parts of sentences using “than” or “as.” (See the handout titled “Coordination and Subordination” for explanation of coordinating and correlative conjunctions.)

Linking with coordinating conjunctions

In a series or pair of **words**:

- Incorrect: I like running, reading, and to shop.

In this sentence the final activity *to shop* is given in the infinitive form while the other two items appear as gerunds. This can be corrected in the following two ways:

- Correct: I like running, reading, and shopping.
- Correct: I like to run, to read, and to shop.

In a series or pair of **phrases** (see the handout titled “Types of Phrases”):

- Incorrect: The nomination for dorm president, doing my homework, and to stay in shape have all absorbed my time and energy this semester.
- Correct: Running for dorm president, doing my homework, and staying in shape have all absorbed my time and energy this semester.

For parallelism in a series or pair of **clauses**, see the handout titled "Clauses and Sentence Structures."

Often students break the rules of parallelism by listing or pairing clauses and phrases together. This sentence, for example, pairs a noun clause with a gerund phrase:

- Incorrect: The girl running through the icy downfall regretted that she had neglected to check the weather forecast and wearing sandals.
- Correct: The girl running through the icy downfall regretted that she had neglected to check the weather forecast and that she had worn sandals.

The problem can be corrected by creating two noun clauses: *that she had neglected to check the weather* and *that she had worn sandals*. Another possible correction:

- Correct: The girl running through the icy downfall regretted neglecting to check the weather forecast and wearing sandals.

This corrects the problem by creating two gerund phrases: *neglecting to check the weather forecast* and *wearing sandals*. Often there are multiple ways to correct a parallelism problem, and the writer will need to determine which grammatical form most clearly communicates his ideas.

Linking with correlating conjunctions:

- Incorrect: His brusque attitude not only irritated his secretary but also is annoying to his clients.
- Correct: His brusque attitude not only irritated his secretary but also annoyed his clients.

In this example, the correlative conjunctions *not only/but also* indicate that parallel construction should be used, and in the corrected sentence both of the linked predicates contain past tense verbs with direct objects.

Comparing:

The rules for parallel comparison follow those for parallel linking;

- Incorrect: Teachers find it more useful to provide examples than defining terms.
- Correct: Teachers find it more useful to provide examples than to define terms.

In this sentence the presence of *than* indicates that parallel construction should be used, and in the corrected sentence both of the compared phrases are in the infinitive form.

What role does parallelism play in creating emphasis?

Sentences that are formed according to the rules of parallel construction allow a reader to grasp more clearly the central ideas being linked or compared, which is often the part of the sentence that the writer intends to emphasize. Writers should also be aware that when ideas are linked in a list, emphasis naturally falls on the last item; consequently, the list should be composed so that the most important item comes last.