



## Parallelism

Parallelism occurs when a writer joins two or more grammatical elements—words, phrases, or clauses—in grammatically balanced form. Maintaining parallel balance helps the reader to connect, to coordinate, to compare, or to contrast ideas. Composing balanced parallel constructions contributes unity, coherence, and clarity to sentences. The repetition in longer constructions adds symmetry and rhythm.

In its simplest form, parallelism pairs or groups individual words:

The Pacific is vast and deep.

Dr. Green's research group studies eagles, hawks, and falcons.

Parallelism can also involve a series of phrases:

On vacation, Valerie took side trips climbing mountains, hiking trails, and exploring caves.

Parallel constructions often join a series of clauses:

The experiment includes the following steps: (1) participants complete a demographic questionnaire; (2) participants view two product labels; (3) participants are asked five questions about product quality.

### A. Ideas in Pairs

The relationship between paired ideas is reinforced when the elements are presented in parallel balance. The three primary methods of connecting paired ideas are (1) with a coordinating conjunction such as *and*, *but*, or *or*; (2) with a pair of correlative conjunctions such as *not/but*, *not only/but also*, *whether/or*, *either/or*; (3) with a word signaling a comparison such as *than* or *as*.

#### (1) Pairings with coordinating conjunctions

Coordinating conjunctions connect closely related or equivalent ideas. The relationship is made clearer when elements linked by a conjunction (*and*, *but*, *or*, *for*, *so*, and *yet*) are presented in parallel balance:

"How could intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment *and* brought the threat of disease and death even to their own kind?"<sup>1</sup>

"Have we fallen into a mesmerized state that makes us accept as inevitable that which is inferior or detrimental, as though having lost the will *or* the vision to demand that which is good?"<sup>2</sup>

#### (2) Pairings with correlative conjunctions

Correlative conjunctions join equivalent elements and come in pairs:

<i>both . . . and</i>	<i>just as . . . so</i>	<i>not only . . . but also</i>
<i>either . . . or</i>	<i>neither . . . nor</i>	<i>whether . . . or</i>

“There will be *neither rest nor tranquility* in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights.”<sup>3</sup>

“We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.”<sup>4</sup>

### (3) Comparisons connected by *than* or *as*

Parallel balance should be maintained between elements linked in comparisons using *than* or *as*:

“’Tis better to have loved and lost / *than* never to have loved at all.”<sup>5</sup>

## B. Parallel Constructions for Ideas Presented in a Series

When three or more grammatical elements are presented in a series, the writer must take care to maintain parallel balance. The parallel construction can occur in the subject or the predicate of the sentence and can involve nouns, adjectives, verbs, infinitives, prepositional phrases, participial phrases, or subordinate clauses, to name a few.

### (1) Nouns and noun phrases

“But the value meals, two-for-one deals, and free refills of soda give a distorted sense of how much fast food actually costs.”<sup>6</sup>

### (2) Adjectives

“Mr. Gore was proud, ambitious, and persevering. He was artful, cruel, and obdurate.”<sup>7</sup>

### (3) Verbs and verb phrases

“Ivan Ilych went out slowly, seated himself disconsolately in his sledge, and drove home.”<sup>8</sup>

### (4) Prepositional phrases

“Rolled away under his desk, I found a blanket; under the empty grate, a blacking box and brush; on a chair, a tin basin with soap and a ragged towel; in a newspaper a few crumbs of ginger-nuts and a morsel of cheese.”<sup>9</sup>

### (5) Clauses

“But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground.”<sup>10</sup>

## C: Recognizing and Correcting Faulty Parallelism

Faulty parallelism occurs when paired or grouped elements are not grammatically balanced. The resulting imbalance usually interrupts the flow of the sentence and distracts the reader.

**X:** Dr. Black taught courses in painting, drawing, and to sculpt.

In the example above, the first two elements of the series are parallel—*painting* and *drawing*—but the third element—*how to sculpt*—upsets the pattern of *-ing* activities (two gerunds and one infinitive). The solution is to present all three activities in the *-ing* form:

✓: Dr. Black taught courses in painting, drawing, and sculpting.

To edit faulty parallelism, first identify all elements presented in series and then take the sentence apart. Arranging the parallel elements in a column will help identify any problems:

X: During a visit to Santa Cruz, Joy enjoyed eating Sushi, fished for perch, and playing arcade games on the pier.

During a visit to Santa Cruz, Joy enjoyed  
eating Sushi,  
**fished** for perch, and  
playing arcade games on the pier.

When arranged as above, the faulty parallelism is easier to spot. The initial words describing activities—*eating*, ***fished***, *playing*—has a problem: ***fished***. Changing *fished* to *fishing* creates parallel balance:

✓: During a visit to Santa Cruz, Joy enjoyed eating Sushi, fishing for perch, and playing arcade games on the pier.

The same approach can be used with paired elements connected by correlative conjunctions:

X: Joy planned *not only* to run on the nature trails *but also* go get a workout at the gym.

First, separate the pairing from the sentence, then arrange the paired elements in a column, beginning each with its correlative conjunction:

Joy planned  
<not only> to run on the nature trails  
<but also> **go get** a workout at the gym.

In the example above, the second of these elements—**go get**—is not parallel with the first—**to run**. So the second is changed to an infinitive to balance with the first:

✓: Joy planned *not only* to run on the nature trails *but also* to work out at the gym.

When using correlative conjunctions, we sometimes misplace them in the sentence. Making a simple change often corrects the problem:

X: Tired from hiking, Joy told Max she would *neither* join him for supper *nor* a walk.

<neither> join him for supper  
<nor> a walk

The first element—*join him for supper*--is a verb, object, and prepositional phrase; the second element—*a walk*--is a noun. If we simply move *neither*, then parallel balance is established:

✓: Tired from hiking, Joy told Max she would join him for *neither* supper *nor* a walk.

<neither> supper  
<nor> a walk

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. (Mariner Books Edition). Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962. 8.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.
- <sup>3</sup> King, Martin Luther, Jr. "I Have a Dream," in *Back to the Lake: A Reader for Writers*, edited by Thomas Cooley. New York: Norton, 2009. 519.
- <sup>4</sup> King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." 16 April 1963. Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University. Accessed July 5, 2016. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>
- <sup>5</sup> Tennyson, Alfred Lord. "In Memoriam A. H. H. OBIT MDCCCXXXIII: 27." Poetry Foundation. Accessed July 14, 2016. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45336>
- <sup>6</sup> Schlosser, Eric. "What We Eat," in *Back to the Lake: A Reader for Writers*, edited by Thomas Cooley. New York: Norton, 2009. 613.
- <sup>7</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Vol. E (3rd ed.), edited by Martin Puchner. New York: Norton, 2012. 245.
- <sup>8</sup> Tolstoy, Leo. "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Vol. E (3rd ed.), edited by Martin Puchner. New York: Norton, 2012. 757.
- <sup>9</sup> Melville, Herman. "Bartleby, the Scrivener," in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Vol. E (3rd ed.), edited by Martin Puchner. New York: Norton, 2012. 307.
- <sup>10</sup> Lincoln, Abraham. "The Gettysburg Address." *The Essential Abraham Lincoln*. Grammercy: New York, 1993. 300.