

Parallel Structure

WHAT IS PARALLEL STRUCTURE?

Parallel structure is the use of matching words, phrases, clauses, or sentence structures to express similar ideas. Parallel structure, or parallelism, occurs when two or more ideas in the sentence perform the same function and are all of the same importance. Parallelism can also increase coherence and comprehension in a paragraph.

When using parallel structures effectively, sentences are easy to follow and emphasize relationships among equivalent ideas. Lack of parallelism can create awkward sentences that have little meaning and confuse readers. Coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, for, nor, so, and yet) signal a need for parallelism.

Parallelism Usage

Parallelism highlights the correspondence between *items in a series*, *paired items*, and *elements in lists and outlines*.

Items in a Series

- Three factors influenced Mary's decision to find a new job: her need for higher wages, her desire to relocate, and her disappointment with her current job.

Paired Items

- In order to graduate, he needs to take additional courses in English and math.
- The difference between planets and stars was the focus of her research project.

Note: Paired items linked by correlative conjunctions (such as not only/but also, both/and, either/or, neither/nor, and whether/or) should be presented in parallel form or else the two ideas will not have the same importance level.

- The football team paid attention *not only to their defense strategy but also to their offense strategy*.

Note: Parallelism also highlights the contrast between paired elements linked by than or as. The verbs in the following sentence are parallel because they are both in the infinitive form.

- Marylu chose to live in Pennsylvania rather than to remain in New Jersey.

Lists and Outlines

(Note: The parts of speech beginning each line are parallel.)

World War II had four main causes:

1. Unfair conditions of the Treaty of Versailles towards Germany;
2. Hitler invading other countries;
3. Germany's failure of appeasement;
4. The failure of the League of Nations to keep peace between countries.

Using Parallel Elements

Do this by matching nouns with nouns, verbs with verbs, and phrases with phrases.

Parallel Nouns

Runners, weight lifters, and swimmers must train rigorously before competitions.

- ⇒ Here, “runners,” “lifters,” and “swimmers” are all nouns; therefore, they are parallel elements and agree.

Parallel Verbs

During the 16th century, railroads **transported** goods at a faster pace, **preserved** food longer during transport, and **sent/received** important messages at a reasonable rate.

- ⇒ Here, “transported,” “preserved,” and “sent/received” are all verbs acting in the past tense; therefore, they are parallel elements and agree.

Parallel Phrases

You can receive an A in the course by studying hard for exams, writing excellent papers, listening to your professor during class, and taking good notes.

- ⇒ Here, the phrases “studying hard for exams,” “writing excellent papers,” “listening to your professor during class,” and “taking good notes” all begin with gerunds (nouns ending in -ing); therefore, they are parallel elements and agree.
- ⇒ Note: In this example, only the first gerund phrase is preceded by the word “by.” In this case, all of the phrases in the series must agree with “by” even though it is only placed before the first phrase. If all of the phrases in the list did not agree with “by,” then the phrases would not be parallel.