

Parallel Structure

Parallel structure, or **parallelism**, is a grammatical concept that holds that all conjoined items in a sentence should be in the same grammatical form. We must observe parallelism when writing sentences with compounds and series.

What is a compound?

Compounds occur when we have two items serving the same grammatical function in a sentence. The most common compounds are compound subjects, compound predicates, and compound objects. Examples:

Compound subject: **Paul and George came over for dinner.** (Paul and George are both subjects)

Compound predicate: **She washes the dishes and empties the trash.** (washes and empties are both verbs being done by “she”)

Compound object: **I need walnuts or peanuts.** (walnuts and peanuts are both objects of the verb “need”)

Notice that the items are joined by a **conjunction** such as “and” or “or,” and no comma is placed between the items.

What is a series?

Parallelism is particularly important when writing sentences with a **series**, or a list of three or more items all serving the same grammatical function in a sentence (e.g., they are all subjects, verbs, or objects). The following sentences all contain examples of a series:

Paul, George, Ringo, and John all came over for dinner. (Paul, George, Ringo, and John are all grammatical subjects)

She washes the dishes, empties the trash, and sweeps the floor. (washes, empties, and sweeps are all grammatical verbs)

I need walnuts, peanuts, or pineapples. (walnuts, peanuts, and pineapples are all grammatical objects)

Notice that each item in the series (besides the last) is followed by a comma, and the conjunction “and” or “or” comes before the last item in the series.

Parallel Parts of Speech

The first consideration in maintaining parallel structure is to ensure that every item in the compound or series starts with the same part of speech. A **part of speech** refers to the “category” of word something is, and for the purposes of parallelism, the most important parts of speech to be familiar with are nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

Here’s an example of a series with faulty parallelism:

She is smart as a whip, funny, and plays the piano. (The first two items start with adjectives, but the last item starts with a verb, “plays”)

Revision: **She is smart as a whip, funny, and good at playing the piano.** (now, all three items start with adjectives)

Here’s another example of faulty parallelism:

We complete our tasks quickly, efficiently, and make no errors. (the first two items start with adverbs, but the last item starts with a verb, “make”)

Revision: **We complete our tasks quickly, efficiently, and accurately.** (now, all three items start with adverbs)

Note: Even if the individual items in a series are quite long, it is still important to make sure they all START with the same part of speech. Example: **I play sold-out concerts all over the world, cook the most delicious food in a variety of cuisines, produce beautiful art that the whole world can enjoy, and demonstrate a tremendous amount of humility in everything that I do.** (despite their length, every item in the series begins with a verb)

Parallel Verbals

There is another thing to consider, though: when your items in a series are all verbals, you must ALSO make sure that they are identical in form. A **verbal** is a verb form that actually functions as a noun or adjective rather than a verb. For the purposes of parallelism, there are two types of verbals you should know:

Infinitive: formed by “to” + the unconjugated form of a verb. Examples: **to dance, to sing, to play**

Infinitive in a sentence: **I love to dance.** (“to dance” is a noun here—the grammatical object)

Gerund: formed by adding the –ing ending to the unconjugated verb. Examples: **dancing, singing, playing**

Gerund in a sentence: **Dancing is my favorite hobby.** (“dancing” is a noun here—the grammatical subject)

To maintain parallelism, you cannot mix and match infinitives and gerunds—all items must be in the same form! Here are examples of series with faulty parallelism because the verbals are inconsistent in form:

I love dancing, singing, and to play the piano. (two gerunds and an infinitive)

I love to dance, to sing, and playing the piano. (two infinitives and a gerund)

Revision: **I love dancing, singing, and playing the piano.** (now, all items are gerunds)

Alternative revision: **I love to dance, to sing, and to play the piano.** (now, all items are infinitives)

Note: In a series with infinitives, it is OK to skip the “to” in infinitives past the first. Example: **I love to dance, sing, and play the piano.**

Parallel Bulleted Lists

Finally, observe the principle of parallelism when writing a bulleted list, especially in professional genres like résumés.

Faulty parallelism:

- **Led an initiative to improve response times** (starts with verb)
- **Collaborated with marketing department to promote services** (starts with verb)
- **Winner of “Employee of the Month” award** (starts with noun)
- **Excellent at customer service** (starts with adjective)

Revision:

- **Led an initiative to improve response times** (starts with verb)
- **Collaborated with marketing department to promote services** (starts with verb)
- **Won “Employee of the Month” award** (starts with verb)
- **Demonstrated excellent customer skills by earning a 93% satisfaction rating** (starts with verb)

Notice, too, that all the verbs are in the past tense. Maintain consistency in verb tense (when appropriate).