

Parallel Structure

Imagine that one day you put on one high heel and one hiking boot. You'd feel lopsided all day. That's how your writing seems if you don't write with parallel structure.

Parallel structure means giving equal grammatical weight to equal grammatical elements.

Parallel structure indicates to your reader that the parallel items are of equal importance. It makes your writing more structurally sound and more memorable, which is something all writers aim to achieve. Parallel structure is also a subtle yet dramatic way to drastically improve your writing; it indicates that you are a masterful, sophisticated writer.

Parallel structure can occur at almost any point in your writing—in words, phrases, clauses, sentences, bulleted lists, or instructions.

Here's a sentence without parallel structure:

Jonathan likes fishing, hiking, and to watch birds.

When we read that sentence, we could infer that Jonathan likes fishing and hiking equally well, but that “to watch birds” is somehow different. We might think that because “to watch birds” doesn't look the same as “fishing” and “hiking.” “To watch birds” doesn't have the same -ing ending that “fishing” and “hiking” have. It's not grammatically equal.

While we can certainly understand the original sentence as written, look at the subtle change that occurs when we translate “to watch bird” into a form that matches the other activities that Jonathan enjoys:

Jonathan likes fishing, hiking, and watching birds.

Now it looks like Jonathan likes these things equally well because they match each other grammatically. Just for the record, the three things Jonathan likes are stated as gerunds; gerunds are verbs that have been changed into a noun by adding an -ing ending.

Let's look at another example:

The professor asked us to record our data quickly, accurately, and in a detailed manner.

We can certainly understand that sentence as written, but we could perceive that “in a detailed manner” was different and perhaps more important than the other two adverbs. Let’s rewrite the sentence to make “in a detailed manner” match those other adverbs:

The professor asked us to record our data quickly, accurately, and thoroughly.

Now the professor’s demands look equal, and they read as though they’re equally important.

Look at Some Masterful Examples of Parallel Structure

Writer’s who’ve achieved a great deal of mastery and sophistication in their writing understand the value of parallel structure. Look at the repetition of the phrase “we shall” in this famous speech by Sir Winston Churchill, who was Prime Minister of England during World War II:

We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

Churchill, a masterful writer who realized the impact of parallel structure, won a Nobel Prize in literature in 1953. After reading the snippet of his speech, you can see for yourself the impact parallel structure can have on a piece of writing. Each sentence includes at least one repetition of the phrase “we shall.” The cumulative impact of this parallel repetition is our conviction that England *will* stand up to opposing forces—and that’s exactly what they did.

Martin Luther King Jr. was another powerful speaker and writer. His rousing, famous speech “I Have a Dream” is full of parallel structure, including this inspiring passage:

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God’s children.

Not only do we have the parallelism of the phrase “Now is the time,” but notice that each repetition of this phrase is followed by an infinitive verb (the word “to” plus a verb). Parallel structure allowed King’s listeners to focus on the *message*—not just on the words.

Look at the Structure of a Parallel List

It may help you to look at the structure of the word “parallel” itself. Look at those two letter “L”s in the word; they’re parallel lines. Marcia Riefer Johnston likens parallel structure to a grocery list approach. When you write a grocery list, you are using parallel structure because your list is comprised of a series of nouns:

- Bananas
- Eggs
- Milk
- Cheese
- Cookies

When you use a bulleted list, you should use parallel structure. A bulleted list is unordered; to indicate to your reader that each item in the list is equally important, you should start each bullet with either the same word or the same part of speech. To construct an effective bulleted list:

- Begin the bulleted list with a sentence that acts as an anchor
- Start each bullet with either the same word or the same part of speech
- Eliminate end punctuation from the items in the bulleted list
- Remember that items in a bulleted list are equally important

Look at Parallel Headings

If you’re using headings in a document, those should be parallel, too. Effective headings

- Are action-oriented (they invite your reader to do something)
- Are informative (they give us enough information to decide whether or not to read what follows the heading)
- Are grammatically parallel (they start with either the same word or the same part of speech)

Look at the subheadings in this handout. They’re all parallel with each other because they all start with “Look.” If you’re still trying to master parallelism, an easy way to achieve it in your headings is to place them in the form of questions that start with the five “w”s: who, what, why, where, when, and how. Question headings are naturally action-oriented and informative, and because each of the “question words” is an adverb, they’re naturally grammatically parallel.

Now, put on two of the same shoes, and get going on improving your writing. ☺

Works Cited

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