

*Proofreading Skills Tutorial:*

**Tutorial #10:**  
**Parallel Structure**

**Writing Center**

**English 800 Center**

**All notes and exercises should be done on separate sheets of paper, which you will bring to your conference with an instructor in the center.**

**As you work through the tutorial, make sure to see an instructional aide at the front desk in the Writing Center or English 800 Center if you have any questions or difficulties.**

## Parallel Structure

Compare the following sentences:

- Marco walked into the room. He looked around. He caught sight of his old girlfriend. He walked right out again.
- Marco **walked into the room, looked around, caught sight of his old girlfriend, and walked right out again.**

Which version do you think is more effective?

Most of us would prefer the second version. It's less choppy, and more economical; the different things Marco did are integrated into one smooth sentence, and old information—"he"—is not repeated unnecessarily. In the second version, rather than leaving each verb in its own sentence, the writer has used **parallel structure**, combining all four verb phrases into a list contained in a single sentence. A **parallel structure** is a list within a sentence of the same kind of word or phrase. As you can see from this example, parallel structure gives details in a less repetitive and more concise way.

Here is another example of a group of sentences, which has been converted into parallel structure:

- Maria went to Chevy's. Yaping went to Chevy's. Frank went to Chevy's.
- **Maria, Yaping, and Frank** went to Chevy's.

Here, the writer has made a list not of verbs but of people who did the same thing; everyone went to Chevy's. Rather than repeat redundant information, the writer has combined the three names into one list contained in a single sentence.

## How Does Parallel Structure Work?

Think for a moment about the word **parallel**. Parallel lines lie so perfectly next to each other and are so identical in shape and direction that they never touch. In a similar way, all the elements in a parallel list must match; that is, they must contain the same grammatical elements, use the same kind of words, and start at the same point in the sentence.

### **Using the Same Grammatical Elements**

With correct parallel structure, each part of a list must use the same grammatical elements. Look at the following sentences and their revisions.

Belinda felt **lonely**.

Belinda felt **depressed**. [and]

Belinda felt **angry**.

POSSIBLE REVISION:

Belinda felt **lonely, depressed and angry**.

adjective   adjective   adjective

Each of the boldfaced words is an adjective describing Belinda's feelings, so this revised sentence contains correct parallel structure.

Consider the following sentences.

Belinda felt **lonely**.

Belinda felt **depressed**. [and]

Belinda felt **a spider crawling up her leg**.

POSSIBLE REVISION:

Belinda felt **lonely, depressed, and a spider crawling up her leg**.

adjective   adjective   noun

As individual sentences, each is correct, but when we put them together in a parallel structure, we find that they do not all describe Belinda's feelings; they are not all adjectives. Because the list does *not* use the **same grammatical element**, the revision contains incorrect parallel structure.

**Principle I: Parallel structure should include the same grammatical elements.**

### **Describing the Same Thing and Using the Same Verb Tense**

Here are some examples of correct and incorrect parallel structure, using lists of words:

#### INCORRECT PARALLEL STRUCTURE:

University graduates have a better chance of entering well-paid professions such as the **law** or **doctors**.

#### CORRECT PARALLEL STRUCTURE:

University graduates have a better chance of entering well-paid professions such as the **law** or **medicine**.

Doctors are people who practice the profession of medicine, and lawyers are people who practice the profession of law. In the incorrect version, **law** and **doctors** are *not* parallel; they describe different things. In the correct version, **law** and **medicine** are parallel; they are both well-paid professions; they describe the same thing.

Now consider these examples:

#### INCORRECT PARALLEL STRUCTURE:

We **found** our seats and **were sitting** down at the table.

#### CORRECT PARALLEL STRUCTURE:

We **found** our seats and **sat** down at the table.

In the incorrect version, **found** and **were sitting** are *not* parallel. **Found** is the simple past verb tense and **were sitting** is the past progressive verb tense. In the correct version, **found** and **sat** are parallel; they are both simple past tense.

**Principle II: Parallel structure should describe the same thing and use the same verb tense.**

### **Revision Tip**

To achieve correct parallel structure, you may sometimes need to rethink the whole sentence:

INCORRECT PARALLEL STRUCTURE:

Shall we go to Chicago next Tuesday or by plane?

CORRECT PARALLEL STRUCTURE:

When shall we go to Chicago, and how shall we get there?

### **Exercise 1**

**Instructions:** Some of the following sentences do not correctly list the same kinds of words. Using Principles I and II, make corrections when necessary. If the sentence is correct, write “CORRECT.” You may have to make substantial revisions, either by substituting a phrase with a single word or changing the parallel structure altogether. The first sentence has been done for you.

1. When Jaime last saw his parents, they started to criticize his clothes, to nag him about his job, and putting down his wife.

*When Jaime last saw his parents, they started to criticize his clothes, to nag him about his job, and to put down his wife.*

2. Let’s face it: we all want money, health and to be happy.

3. I went to the store, was driving home, and pulled in the driveway.
4. Yi adores Hungarian dishes like hortobagy pancakes, stuffed duck, and spicy ingredients.
5. The Mateo brothers worked as lumberjacks, psychotherapists, fruit-pickers, and driving trucks.

### Starting at the Same Point in the Sentence

In addition to **using the same grammatical elements, describing the same thing and using the same verb tense**, you should also be sure where your list starts. This is not always as easy as it sounds. For instance, here is a parallel structure that does *not* work:

#### INCORRECT PARALLEL STRUCTURE:

The Governor issued a press release to condemn // **drug use, tax evasion, and clear up his own image.**

The Governor issued a press release to condemn **drug use.**

The Governor issued a press release to condemn **tax evasion.**

The Governor issued a press release to condemn **clear up his own image.**

At first the sentence appears to give us a list of what the Governor is condemning. The list is in boldface and marked with a **double stroke or //**. But “**clear up his own image**” is not a thing that the Governor can condemn. If a single element in a list cannot connect on its own to the main sentence, the sentence does not really have parallel structure.

Suppose, however, the sentence had read like this:

#### CORRECT PARALLEL STRUCTURE:

The Governor issued a press release // **to condemn drug use and tax evasion and to clear up his own image.**

Unlike the incorrect parallel structure, the list begins not *after* the word “condemn,” but just *before* it. It is a list **not** of the things the Governor wants to condemn, but of different things the

Governor wants to do—to **condemn drug use and tax evasion and to clear up his own image**. Now, the list makes sense. The trouble with the incorrect version is that **the writer forgot precisely where she started the list**.

Here's another sentence with the same problem: the writer is not clear about where the list starts:

INCORRECT PARALLEL STRUCTURE:

Jaime wanted to be like // **his mother, his father, and stop smoking**.

Jaime wanted to be like **his mother**.

Jaime wanted to be like **his father**.

Jaime wanted to be like **stop smoking cigarettes**.

As in our previous example, if a single element in a list cannot connect on its own to the main sentence, the sentence does not really have parallel structure.

CORRECT PARALLEL STRUCTURE:

Jaime wanted // **to be like his mother and father and to stop smoking cigarettes**.

Now, the list makes sense. The trouble with the incorrect version is that **the writer forgot precisely where she started the list**.

**Principle III: Parallel structure should start at the same point in the sentence.**

Just as parallel lines lie perfectly next to each other and are identical in shape and direction, in a similar way, all the elements in a parallel list must match; that is, they must contain the same grammatical elements, describe the same kind of things, use the same tenses, and **start at the same point in the sentence**.



## Revision Suggestions

1. Find the start of the list:

Frank wanted to // **sing, dance, laugh, and a slice of pie.**

2. Try out each part of the parallel list to the main sentence, one at a time, to identify the one that does not work:

Frank wanted to **sing**

Frank wanted to **dance**

Frank wanted to **laugh**

Frank wanted to **a slice of pie**

In this case, each of the boldfaced words is a verb except for “a slice of pie,” which is a noun.

3. Fix the one that does not work and make it parallel into line:

Frank wanted to **sing, dance, laugh** and **eat**.

**verb   verb   verb   verb**

NOTE: If you can't make one part of a parallel list fit with the beginning of the sentence, it probably should not be part of that sentence at all. Instead, you might move the non-parallel part to a new sentence. Look at the following example:

Most anti-abortion protesters are convinced // **that the fetus is a person, that abortion is murder, and ready to act on their convictions.**

Again, try out each part of the parallel list to the main sentence, one at a time, to identify the one that does not work:

Most anti-abortion protesters are convinced **that the fetus is a person.**

Most anti-abortion protesters are convinced **that abortion is murder.**

Most anti-abortion protesters are convinced **ready to act on their convictions.**

REVISION: Most anti-abortion protesters are convinced **that the fetus is a person and that abortion is murder. These protesters are ready to act on their convictions.**

## Exercise 2

**Instructions:** Using Principles I, II, and III, revise the following sentences to restore the parallel structure. The first one has been done for you.

1. No one helped the President with the budget or consulting the First Lady.  
*No one helped the President with the budget or consulted the First Lady.*
2. The union leader spoke with passion, conviction and for several hours.
3. Most women would like men to help with domestic chores such as cleaning, cooking, washing and more free time.
4. She has an open mind, is willing to listen to anyone's opinions, but a heart of stone.
5. I ran home, threw my clothes into the laundry, and the linen.
6. She helped to change the oil in the car, weed the yard, and with moving the furniture.

## Exercise 3

### Instructions:

1. Review an essay that you have recently written. Do you notice any incorrect parallel structure such as not describing the same kinds of things in a parallel list or not starting at the same point in the sentence? Make corrections as necessary.
2. Look back at the principles and exercises in this tutorial and make notes on a separate sheet of paper. You will bring these notes and the essay to your conference.
3. Make an appointment for a conference with an instructor in the Writing Center (18-104) or English 800 Center (18-102). To make this appointment, stop by the Centers or call (650) 574-6436. During this appointment, the professor will make sure you understand the concepts covered in this tutorial, answer any questions that you might have, review your answers to these exercises, and check to see if you can incorporate the skill into your writing.

### Reminder:

For this appointment, bring

- any notes about the tutorial that you have taken
- your completed tutorial exercises
- and the essay