



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

PARALLELISM

Using parallelism helps to reduce repetition in writing, so it is very useful for writers. However, it is easy to have faulty (bad) parallelism. In this handout, you will learn how to create parallelism, how to recognize faulty parallelism, and how to correct faulty parallelism when proofreading your writing.

When we join a list of two or more things in a sentence with *and*, *but*, or *or*, we need to make sure that the elements in the list are parallel. **Parallel**, in this sense, means balanced or equal. Items in a list need to be parallel in both grammar and function.

Parallel Grammar

The grammar of the listed elements must be parallel. For example, you can join nouns to nouns, adjectives to adjectives, prepositional phrases to prepositional phrases, or clauses to clauses, but you cannot join nouns to adjectives, or phrases to clauses.

Parallel:

- ◆ *He is tired, lonely, and hungry.* (adjectives are joined to adjectives)
- ◆ *He took a book, a pen and, a pad of paper.* (nouns are joined to nouns)
- ◆ *She walked to the skytrain, bought a ticket, and got on the westbound train.* (verb + noun is joined to verb + noun)

Not Parallel:

- ◆ *He is tired, lonely, and in a hurry.* (*tired* and *lonely* are adjectives, but *in a hurry* is a prepositional phrase)
- ◆ *He took a book, a pen, and wrote.* (*book* and *pen* are nouns, but *wrote* is a verb.)
- ◆ *She walked to the skytrain, bought a ticket, and she got on the westbound train.* (*walked to the skytrain* and *bought a ticket* are verb + noun, but *she got on the westbound train* is a clause)

Parallel Function

The function of the elements must also be parallel. For example, you can join physical description to physical description, but you generally cannot join physical description to feelings.

Parallel:

- ◆ *You can get cell phones in red, blue, green, and black.* (all are colours)
- ◆ *Maria likes milk, loves tea, and hates coffee.* (all describe emotions about food)
- ◆ *They took vegetables, meat, and fruit on the camping trip.* (all types of food)

Not Parallel:

- ◆ *You can get cell phones in red, blue, shiny, and black.* (*red, blue, and black* are colours, but *shiny* describes a different aspect of the phone)
- ◆ *Maria likes milk, loves tea, hates coffee, and sings love songs.* (*likes milk, loves tea, and hates coffee* are all emotions about food, but *sings love songs* is an action)
- ◆ *They took vegetables, meat, and three green apples on the camping trip.* (*vegetables and meat* are general food categories, but *three green apples* is very specific)

Exercise 1: Identifying Non-Parallel Elements

In each of the following lists, one element does not fit with the others. Circle the non-parallel element.

Example:

- a) A tall building b) a huge park c) a friend of mine
1. a) on the sidewalk b) under the tree c) my house
2. a) a hamburger b) french fries c) lots of fun
3. a) to wash the dishes b) cleaning the bathroom c) to vacuum the carpet
4. a) he called his sister b) he went home c) determination to do the right thing
5. a) easily b) noiselessly c) without looking
6. a) angry b) social c) emotional

Exercise 2: Identifying Parallel Elements in Sentences

In the following sentences, underline the parallel elements. Draw two parallel lines like this (*//*) where the parallelism begins and ends.

Example:

Most offices have // photocopiers, fax machines and computers // for their employees to use.

1. Employees use computers to write letters, keep records, calculate expenses, and do payroll.
2. Computers are useful, but frustrating, tools.
3. Unfortunately, computers cannot think the way humans do, and humans cannot think the way computers do.
4. Companies complain that computers are expensive to purchase and to maintain, but they also note that computers are necessary for the modern office.
5. In fact, both employees and employers seem to love and hate computers with equal passion.
6. Despite this ambivalence, computers are used in the offices of travel agencies, manufacturing plants, department stores, and government agencies.

Exercise 3: Identifying Parallelism in the Real World

Look in a college textbook, a newspaper, or a magazine and find sentences that show examples of parallelism. Write 3 of those sentences below. As in the exercise above, underline the parallel elements and mark where the parallelism begins and ends.

1. _____

Continued from page 3

2. _____

3. _____

Exercise 4: Identifying Parallel and Non-Parallel Elements

Underline the parallel elements in the following sentences. Mark the beginning of the parallelism with //. Circle elements in lists that are not parallel. Write “P” beside sentences with good parallelism and “F” beside sentences with faulty parallelism.

Example:

F *Urban wildlife includes animals like // raccoons, skunks, and bigger animals*

1. ___ Raccoons like to forage for garbage at night, play on city streets at dusk, and during the day they sleep.
2. ___ Many people think urban wildlife is a problem, but others believe we should protect these animals.
3. ___ A raccoon can be recognized by its black facial mask, ringed tail and its thick black coat.
4. ___ Raccoons are insatiably curious, extremely intelligent, and love shiny object

Continued from page 4

5. ___ These animals are so clever that they wash or wipe their food before eating it.
6. ___ They eat insects, fruit, and garbage in the city.
7. ___ In the wild, they prefer to eat frogs, fish, and shellfish.
8. ___ From November to January, a raccoon will find an abandoned building building, hollow tree, or a bush to shelter from the cold.
9. ___ Mating occurs in February, and raccoon kittens are born in spring, April, or May.
10. ___ The young are nursed for four months and spend their first year with their mothers.

Exercise 5: Completing Lists with Parallel Elements

Fill in the blanks in the following sentences with elements that are parallel to the italicized parts.

Example:

College students are busy people. They *take courses* and often _____ too.

1. Taking a writing course involves *listening to lectures* and _____ .
2. Writing instructors expect students *to do research* and _____ .
3. In many science courses, students write *lab reports* and _____ .
4. Language learning courses involve *the memorization of new vocabulary* and _____ .
5. A great part of student life is the opportunity to meet other people. Students meet new people *in the cafeteria, at sporting events,* and _____ .

Continued from page 5

6. *Friends* and _____ can be very important support networks for students who are taking courses in college.
7. *Some students like to study with others in study groups, but*
_____ .
8. College life is *stressful* but _____ .
9. One student quit college because *she had no money* and
_____ .
10. Another student reported that at college she learned *how to study, how to think, and* _____ .

Exercise 6: Writing Sentences Using Parallelism

Write one sentence which answers each of the following questions. Be sure to include a list of at least 3 parallel elements in each sentence. Underline the parallel elements and put two parallel lines at the beginning and end of the parallel sections as in Exercise 2.

1. What do you like to do in your free time?

In my free time, I like to ...

2. Why do students go to college?

Continued from page 6

3. How can a new student in town find an apartment?

4. Describe one of your favorite places.

Exercise 7: Sentence Combining

Combine each of the following groups of short sentences into one long sentence which uses parallel form.

1. Successful students usually have clear goals.
Successful students usually have good basic schools.
Successful students usually have strong determination.

2. When listening to lectures, a college student must think about what he hears.
When listening to lectures, a college student must judge what is important.
When listening to lectures, a college student must take notes of what he needs to remember.

Continued from page 7

3. Writing a good essay involves pre-writing.
Writing a good essay involves drafting.
Writing a good essay involves editing.
Writing a good essay involves proofreading.
-
-
-

Solving Parallelism Problems

So far in this handout, you have learned about basic issues around parallelism. You have practiced recognizing and writing basic parallel structures. You have also practiced recognizing faulty parallelism. However, sometimes it can be hard to put items into a parallel list. For example, if you want to describe a person you know, you may think of adjectives like friendly, kind, and intelligent. However, you may want to say something about the person's appearance. You may want to say she is tall and has red hair. So, how can these various things be combined using parallelism? This section suggests strategies to deal with such difficult situations.

Strategy 1: Change parts of speech

One way to solve parallelism problems is to change the different element to a more similar form. For example, if you want to combine two adjectives and a noun into a list, one option is to change the part of speech of the noun into the form of an adjective. To illustrate, if you want to say that a person has red hair and is tall, you could change "red hair" into an adjective form "red-headed". Then your sentence will be parallel. The sentence would read like this:

Karen is // tall and red-headed.

If you have difficulty recognizing or changing word forms, see the Learning Centre handout titled "Word Form".

Strategy 2: Start the parallelism sooner

A second way to solve parallelism problems is to start the parallelism sooner. With the tall and red hair example, you could start the parallelism before the verb. In this way, you would end up with this sentence:

Karen // is tall and has red hair.

The starting point for the parallelism is now before the verb. Because the most important grammatical aspect of parallelism is the first word in the parallel elements, this option works well.

Strategy 3: Create multiple parallelisms

This strategy involves making more than one parallel list in a sentence. Let's say you want to combine the following sentences into one.

- ◆ *Karen is tall.*
- ◆ *Karen has red hair.*
- ◆ *Karen is beautiful.*
- ◆ *Karen has green eyes.*
- ◆ *Karen has lovely skin.*

In this case, *tall* and *beautiful* go together well. Both are attached to the verb "is" and both are physical descriptions. In the same way, *red hair*, *green eyes*, and *lovely skin* go together. All three are attached to the verb "has" and all are physical descriptions. So, you could write a combined sentence like this:

Karen is tall and beautiful, and has red hair, green eyes, and lovely skin.

There are really three parallel lists in this group. The first parallel list is *tall and beautiful*; another is *red hair, green eyes, and lovely skin*. The third list is the two previous lists combined (*is tall and beautiful + has red hair, green eyes, and lovely skin*).

Exercise 8: Correcting Faulty Parallelism

In this exercise, underline the elements that should be parallel. Then circle the element that is **not** parallel. After that, rewrite the sentence to create parallelism. You will notice that you can create parallelism in a number of different ways.

Example:

Cathy is imaginative, intelligent, and creates things.

1. Peter likes singing, dancing, and to swim in his free time.

2. The winter in Vancouver can be wet, dark, and depresses me.

3. The instructor put words, pictures, and drew charts on the overhead.

4. The ideal conditions for growing tomatoes are spring rain, sun in summer, and dry weather in fall.

5. Singing in the shower, to camp in the woods, and conversation with her friends are all things she enjoys.

Exercise 9: Sentence Combining

Try combining these groups of sentences into one sentence each. These are more difficult than the sentences you made in Exercise 7. Use the three strategies described above.

1. Frank loves science fiction movies.
Frank loves adventure movies.
Frank hates comedies.
Frank hates romantic movies.
Frank hates cowboy movies.

2. The psychology instructor explained introversion.
The psychology instructor explained extroversion.
The students asked questions.
The students discussed their personality types.

3. Olivia work on a time-consuming assignment.
The assignment caused difficulty.

4. Fiona worked in Vancouver.
Fiona studied in New Westminster.
Fiona lived in Richmond.
Virginia worked in New Westminster.
Virginia studied in New Westminster.
Virginia lived in New Westminster.

Continued from page 11

5. The child is happy.
The child is in good health.
The child lives with his aunt.
The child lives with his cousins.
-
-

Proofreading For Parallelism Problems

Parallelism is an issue that should not concern you while you are writing a paragraph or essay. Instead, you should leave concerns about parallelism until the editing or proofreading stage of writing. Even very good writers have parallelism problems in their writing. After they have completed a draft, they need to go back and check their writing for parallelism problems. These are the steps to follow:

1. Go through your paper and identify every time the words *and*, *but*, *or* or *or* are used. Circle them.
2. For each circled word, look for the elements in the list. Underline them and mark where the parallelism begins and ends.
3. For each list, consider whether all elements are parallel. Consider both grammar and function.
4. Change faulty parallelism using the three strategies described earlier: change parts of speech, start the parallelism sooner, or create multiple parallelism.

Exercise 10: Proofreading for Faulty Parallelism

Follow the four steps described above to proofread the following paragraph. You may also find some situations in the paragraph where you need more parallelism to reduce wordiness. Rewrite the paragraph on a separate sheet of paper.

The uses humans have for dogs can be classified into two main categories: dogs as pets and working dogs. Dogs can be wonderful pets. They can be good companions, they can help keep their owners safe, and they can help keep their owners healthy. Working dogs are of many types. Some working dogs are guard dogs who protect businesses and property. Other working dogs are guide dogs for people who can't see well or are totally blind. They help their owners to cross the street safely and happy. Other working dogs are police dogs. They are trained to track criminals, finding drugs, and find lost objects. Working dogs can also help farmers, shepherds, and ranchers. They can protect crops, they can protect other animals, and they can warn their owners about dangerous situations. Humans are fortunate that dogs exist.

Exercise 11: Proofreading Your Own Writing

Choose one of the following topics and write a paragraph about it. Then proofread your paragraph. Correct any faulty parallelism you find and add parallelism to make your paragraph less wordy.

- ◆ Classify the uses of wood
- ◆ Describe a friend
- ◆ Describe a trip you've taken

For more practice with parallelism, see:

Azar, B. (1989). Understanding and using English grammar. Toronto: Prentice-Hall. pp. 287-294.

Benson, B. and Byrd, P. (1989). Improving the grammar of written English: the editing process. Boston: Heinle and Heinle. pp. 99 and 101.

Langan, J. (1989). Sentence skills: a workbook for writers (4th ed.) form A. New York: McGraw-Hill. pp. 100-104.

Norton, S. and Green, B. (1990). The bare essentials. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Chapter 8.