Parallel Structure

Parallel structure is using the same pattern of words to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance. This can happen at the word, phrase, or clause level. The usual way to join parallel structures is with the use of coordinating conjunctions such as "and" or "or."

Sentence-level Parallel Structure

- **Words and phrases**
  - **With the -ing form (gerund) of words**

    Parallel: Mary likes hik**ing**, swimm**ing**, and bicycl**ing**.

  - **With infinitive phrases**

    Parallel: Mary likes **to hike**, **to swim**, and **to ride** a bicycle.

    OR

    Mary likes to **hike**, **swim**, and **ride** a bicycle.

    (Note: You can use "to" before all the verbs in a sentence or only before the first one.)

- **Do not mix forms.**

  Not Parallel: Mary likes hik**ing**, swimm**ing**, and **to ride** a bicycle.

  Parallel: Mary likes hik**ing**, swimm**ing**, and rid**ing** a bicycle.

  Not Parallel: The production manager was asked to write his report quick**ly**, accurate**ly**, and **detailed**.

  Parallel: The production manager was asked to write his report quick**ly**, accurate**ly**, and thorough**ly**.

  Not Parallel: The teacher said that he was a poor student because he wait**ed** until the last minute to study for the exam, complet**ed** his lab reports in a careless manner, and **his motivation was** low.

  Parallel: The teacher said that he was a poor student because he wait**ed** until the last minute to study for the exam, complet**ed** his lab reports in a careless manner, and lack**ed** motivation.

Sentence-level Parallel Structure (continued)

- **Clauses**

  A parallel structure that begins with clauses must continue using clauses. Changing to another pattern or changing the voice of the verb (from active to passive or vice versa) will break the parallelism.

  Not Parallel: The coach told the players **that they should get** a lot of sleep, **that they should not eat** too much, and **to do** some warm-up exercises before the game.

  Parallel: The coach told the players **that they should get** a lot of sleep, **that they should not eat** too much, and **that they should do** some warm-up exercises before the game.

  OR

  Parallel: The coach told the players that they should **get** a lot of sleep, not **eat** too much, and **do** some warm-up exercises before the game.

  Not Parallel: The salesman expected **that he would present** his product at the meeting, that **there would be** time for him to show his slide presentation, and **that questions would be asked** by prospective buyers. **(last clause is passive)**

  Parallel: The salesman expected **that he would present** his product at the meeting, that **there would be** time for him to show his slide presentation, and **that prospective buyers would ask** him questions. **(all clauses are active)**

- **Lists after a colon**

  Be sure to keep all the elements in a list in the same form.

  Not Parallel: The dictionary can be used for these purposes: to find **word meanings**, **pronunciations**, **correct spellings**, and **looking up irregular verbs**. **(last clause is a gerund)**

  Parallel: The dictionary can be used for these purposes: to find **word meanings**, **pronunciations**, **correct spellings**, and **irregular verbs**. **(all clauses are plural nouns)**

Proofreading strategies

- Skim your paper, pausing at the words "and" and "or." Check on each side of these words to see whether the items joined are parallel. If not, make them parallel.

- If you have several items on a list, put them in a column to see if they are parallel.

- Listen to the sound of the items in a list or the items being compared. Do you hear the same kinds of sounds? For example, is there is a series of "-ing" words beginning each item? Do you hear a rhythm being repeated? If something is breaking that rhythm or repetition of sound, check to see if it needs to be made parallel.

Theme-Based Parallel Structure

- **If your introduction or thesis contains a certain number of elements, structure your paper so that it is parallel to the order in which those elements appear.**

    Example:

    Thesis: Wordsworth uses themes of **hallucination**, **sleep**, and **death** to illustrate the ties between reality and the world of the mind.

    Paragraph one: Focus on **hallucination**.

    Paragraph two: Focus on **sleep**.

    Paragraph three: Focus on **death**.

Within each paragraph, parallel structure can be used to organize thoughts and examples.

Paragraph one: Topic: Explanation of Wordsworth's use of **hallucination** in poetry. Structure: Quotations from poems. Connection between **hallucination** and ties between reality and the mind (follows thesis statement).

Paragraph two: Topic: Explanation of Wordsworth's use of **sleep** in poetry. Structure: Quotations from poems. Connection between **sleep** and ties between reality and the mind.

Paragraph three: Topic: Explanation of Wordsworth's use of **death** in poetry. Structure: Quotations from poems. Connection between **death** and ties between reality and the mind.