

## #18) Parallelism

The purpose of this handout is to define parallelism in writing, to identify the many forms of parallelism, and to demonstrate techniques for recognizing and correcting faulty parallelism. The handout also includes an exercise for identifying parallelism and an exercise for correcting faulty parallelism.

### Parallelism Defined

Parallelism occurs when we pair, or present in a series, two or more grammatical elements—words, phrases, or clauses—in grammatically balanced form. Maintaining parallel balance helps the reader to connect, to coordinate, to compare, or to contrast ideas. Composing balanced parallel constructions contributes unity, coherence, and clarity to sentences. The repetition present in longer parallel constructions also adds a stylistically pleasing symmetry and rhythm.

In its simplest form, parallelism pairs or groups individual words:

Victor is tall, dark, and handsome.

Victoria is lithe, lean, and lovely.

Parallelism can also involve a series of phrases:

Victor and Victoria enjoyed a leisurely afternoon on the boardwalk, eating salt-water taffy, playing games in the arcade, and riding through the Tunnel of Love.

Parallel constructions often join a series of clauses:

Victoria explained to Victor why she couldn't consider marrying him: "You don't have a job; you don't have a car; you certainly don't have money to buy me a ring!"

### Parallelism: The Many Forms

#### A. Parallel Constructions for Ideas Presented in Pairs

The relationship between paired ideas is reinforced and made clearer when the elements are presented in parallel balance. Parallel pairings can be used to make comparisons or to establish contrasts. The three primary methods of connecting paired ideas are (1) with a coordinating conjunction such as *and*, *but*, or *or*; (2) with a pair of correlative conjunctions such as *not/but*, *not only/but also*, *whether/or*, *either/or*; (3) with a word signaling a comparison such as *than* or *as*.

##### 1) Pairings with coordinating conjunctions

Coordinating conjunctions connect closely related or equivalent ideas. The relationship is made clearer when elements linked by a conjunction (*and*, *but*, *or*, *for*, *so*, and *yet*) are presented in parallel balance:

How could intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment *and* brought the threat of disease and death even to their own kind? - R. Carson

Have we fallen into a mesmerized state that makes us accept as inevitable that which is inferior or detrimental, as though having lost the will or the vision to demand that which is good? - R. Carson

## 2) Pairings with correlative conjunctions

Correlative conjunctions join equivalent elements and come in pairs:

<i>both . . . and</i>	<i>just as . . . so</i>	<i>not only . . . but also</i>
<i>either . . . or</i>	<i>neither . . . nor</i>	<i>whether . . . or</i>

In a movie when a man sits next to a woman on a bus, it is necessary either that the bus break down or that the woman lose her memory. - W. Percy

My purpose in going to Walden Pond, like yours, was not to live cheaply or to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles. - E. B. White

## 3) Comparisons connected by *than* or *as*

Parallel balance should be maintained between elements linked in comparisons using *than* or *as*:

Better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all. - A. Tennyson

Then I perceived that wisdom is more profitable than folly, as light is more profitable than darkness.  
- *Ecclesiastes 2*

## B. Parallel Constructions for Ideas Presented in a Series

When three or more grammatical elements are presented in a series, the writer must take care to maintain parallel balance. The parallel construction can occur in the subject or the predicate of the sentence and can involve nouns, adjectives, verbs, infinitives, prepositional phrases, participial phrases, and subordinate clauses, to name a few. Parallelism can even extend through an entire paragraph.

### 1) Nouns and noun phrases (including articles and adjectives)

Every beast, every creeping thing, and every fowl, and whatsoever creepeth upon the earth, after their kinds, went forth out of the ark. - *Genesis 8*

Farmers were already moving the fruits of their toil into their yards, arranging the rhubarb, the asparagus, the strictly fresh eggs on the painted stands under the little shed roofs with the patent shingles. - E.B. White

The canyon must be approached by the stratagems we have mentioned: the Inside Track, the Familiar Revisited, the Accidental Encounter. - W. Percy

They were worthless scientifically . . . though humanly they were full of instruction, interest, boredom, and very queer facts about the habits of the Fiji Islanders. - V. Woolf

Sometimes the feelings, passions, virtues, and vices of an aristocracy may reappear in a democracy, but its manners never. - A. de Tocqueville

### 2) Adjectives

This obscure, extravagant, and disgusting poem was despised at its birth. - F. Voltaire

My manuscripts, scratched, smeared, muddled, and almost illegible, bear witness to the trouble they have cost me. - J. Rousseau

Mr. Gore was proud, ambitious, and persevering. He was artful, cruel, and obdurate. - F. Douglas

When the poet Jean Toomer walked through the South in the early twenties, he discovered a curious thing: black women whose spirituality was so intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held. - A. Walker

The new mansion for governors of California, unlandscaped, unfurnished, and unoccupied since the day construction stopped in 1975, stands on eleven acres of oaks and olives on a bluff overlooking the American River outside Sacramento. - J. Didion

### 3) Verbs and verb phrases

Automobiles, skirting a village green, are like flies that have gained the inner ear—they buzz, cease, pause, start, shift, stop, halt, brake, and the whole effect is a nervous polytone curiously disturbing. - E. B. White

Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. - Dr. M. L. King, Jr.

So it was inevitable that we would get a revisionist history of . . . the period . . . when the Committee of Public Safety, in Paris, invented the modern thought crime, cut off the heads of its enemies, and created the apparatus of the totalitarian state. - A. Gopnik

I clenched my hands, bit my tongue, and kept praying. - T. Williams

The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back, and ground him into the earth. - G. Orwell

*Education, n.* That which discloses to the wise and disguises to the foolish their lack of understanding.  
- A. Bierce (entry from *The Devil's Dictionary*)

### 4) Prepositional phrases

The Malaysian stood in the gold fields alongside the African, alongside the Chinese, alongside the Australian, alongside the Yankee. - R. Rodriguez

I think it is agreed by all parties, that this prodigious number of children in the arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is, in the deplorable state of the kingdom, a very great additional grievance. - J. Swift

If therefore you wish to make one of your imaginary animals appear natural—let us suppose it to be a dragon—take for its head that of a mastiff or setter, for its eyes those of a cat, for its ears those of a porcupine, for its nose that of a greyhound, with the eyebrows of a lion, the temples of an old cock and the neck of a water tortoise. - L. da Vinci

And it may be that in this continuity, this utter indifference of life and death, lies the secret of our ultimate salvation, of the stream of life on our planet, and of our dignity as human beings, - A. Chekhov

### 5) Clauses

Some of the people said that the elephant had gone in one direction, some said that he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant. - G. Orwell

Cunegonde dropped her handkerchief, Candide picked it up; she held his hand quite innocently, he kissed her hand quite innocently with remarkable vivacity and emotion; their lips met, their knees trembled, their hands wandered. – F. Voltaire

But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate— we cannot consecrate— we cannot hallow— this ground.  
- A. Lincoln

The sun shone, the wind had passed away, the hills looked cheerful. – D. Wordsworth

Everything lives. Thunder lives, and rain lives, and sunshine lives. – D.H. Lawrence

The housepainter was descending his ladder; the nursemaid was wheeling the perambulator carefully in and out back to nursery tea; the coal heaver was folding his empty sacks on top of each other; the woman who keeps the green-grocer's shop was adding up the day's takings with her hands in her red mittens. – V. Woolf

## 6) Paragraphs

But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for Love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. . . ." - Dr. M.L. King, Jr.

## Recognizing and Correcting Faulty Parallelism

Faulty parallelism occurs when a writer fails to present paired or grouped elements in grammatically balanced form and creates a needlessly awkward sentence. The resulting imbalance usually interrupts the flow of the sentence and distracts the reader. In the following sections, (X) = faulty parallelism & (√) = balanced parallel construction.

Victor loves singing, dancing, and to have swordfights. (X)

In the example above, the first two elements of the series are parallel—*singing* and *dancing*—but the third element—*to have swordfights*—upsets the pattern of *-ing* activities (two gerunds and one infinitive). One solution to this problem is to present all three activities in the *-ing* form:

Victor loves singing, dancing, and sword fighting. (√)

Or, we can change all three elements to infinitives:

Victor loves to sing, to dance, and to sword fight. (√)

In order to effectively edit faulty parallelisms, the beginning writer should first identify all sentences with elements presented in series, and should then take each sentence apart and arrange the parallel elements in a column to identify any problems:

Victor and Victoria enjoyed a leisurely afternoon on the boardwalk, eating salt-water taffy, played games in the arcade, and riding through the Tunnel of Love. (X)

Victor and Victoria enjoyed a leisurely afternoon on the boardwalk,  
eating salt water taffy,  
**played** games in the arcade, and (X)  
riding through the Tunnel of Love.

When arranged in the manner above, it is easier to recognize the faulty parallelism. The succession of initial words describing activities—*eating*, *played*, *riding*—has a sore-thumb member in the middle—*played*. Changing *played* to *playing* solves the problem:

Victor and Victoria enjoyed a leisurely afternoon on the boardwalk, eating salt-water taffy, playing games in the arcade, and riding through the Tunnel of Love. (✓)

A similar exercise can be performed on sentences with paired elements connected with correlative conjunctions:

Victor told Victoria that he wanted not only to take her out for a lobster dinner but also go walking on the moonlit beach. (X)

First, separate the pairing from the sentence, then arrange the paired elements in a column, beginning each with its correlative conjunction:

<not only> to take her out for a lobster dinner  
<but also> **go walking** on the moonlit beach (X)

In the example above, the second of these elements—*go walking*—is not parallel with the first—*to take*. So the second is changed to an infinitive to balance with the first:

Victor told Victoria that he wanted not only to take her out for a lobster dinner but also to go for a walk on the moonlit beach. (✓)

Sometimes when using correlative conjunctions, we accidentally misplace them in the sentence. Making a simple change to the sentence often corrects the problem:

Victoria told Victor that she would neither join him for supper nor a walk. (X)

<neither> join him for supper (X)  
<nor> a walk

The paired elements are out of balance. The first element—*join him for supper*—includes a verb, its object, and a prepositional phrase; the second element—*a walk*—is a noun (and an article). But in this case, if we simply move the first correlative conjunction—*neither*—to a new location in the sentence, then parallel balance is established:

Victoria told Victor that she would join him for neither supper nor a walk. (✓)

<neither> supper (✓)  
<nor> a walk (✓)

Experienced writers generally repeat signal words that lead parallel phrases and clauses. In some cases, the repetition of signal words introducing phrases and clauses presented in a series is optional—a stylistic choice—as the following example demonstrates:

Victor told Victoria that the lobster tails would be remarkable and that the moonlit walk would be unforgettable. (✓+)

Victor told Victoria that the lobster tails would be remarkable and the moonlit walk would be unforgettable. (~✓)

In the first example above, the word *that* is used to introduce each of the parallel dependent clauses. In the second example, *that* is only used once: the writer trusts the reader to apply the word *that* to the beginning of the second clause. The repetition in the first example makes it *explicitly* clear to the reader that Victor told Victoria *both* things. Most handbooks recommend repeating these signal words.

Often, through a desire to be efficient in our writing, we will omit unnecessary words. There is, perhaps, one more way to compose the sentence above and to communicate the same idea:

Victor told Victoria that the lobster tails would be remarkable and the moonlit walk unforgettable. (✓)

The sentence above omits the verb phrase *would be* from the second dependent clause, and trusts the reader to understand that it's there by suggestion. This kind of omission is acceptable in most instances and is called an "elliptical construction." Here's another example:

But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream. – Amos 5 (✓)

Again, we have paired parallel elements, and the second element has been truncated—the verb phrase (*run down*) omitted. The column method can be used to more clearly display the omitted phrasing:

But let

judgment run down as waters, and (✓)  
righteousness (run down) as a mighty stream. (✓)

To see one more example of an elliptical construction, return to page 4 of this handout, and read again the long quotation from Dr. King, which is an example of parallelism extended through a paragraph. King begins the parallel construction with *Was not Jesus an extremist for Love*; he repeats the parallel phrasing across three more examples (Amos, Paul, and Martin Luther); he then employs an elliptical construction—King switches to *And John Bunyan*, omitting the use of *Was not . . . an extremist* for his last three examples (Bunyan, Lincoln, and Jefferson), trusting the reader, in effect, to supply the omitted phrasing. The use of elliptical constructions is a stylistic choice.

## Exercise One – Recognizing Parallelism

*The following passages are excerpted from Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." King made frequent use of parallelism in his writings and speeches. Read the following passages and underline all the parallel constructions. When you are done, you can check your underlining against the key that follows.*

- 1) Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth century prophets left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.
- 2) Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country.
- 3) It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and the segregated a false sense of inferiority.
- 4) We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal."
- 5) We must come to see, as the federal courts have consistently affirmed, that it is immoral to urge an individual to withdraw his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest precipitates violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber.
- 6) Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill-will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will.
- 7) We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people.
- 8) I say it as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.
- 9) I don't believe you would so quickly commend the policemen if you would observe their ugly and inhuman treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you would watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you would see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you will observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I'm sorry that I can't join you in your praise for the police department.
- 10) I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,

Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Exercise One: Answer Key – Recognizing Parallelism

- 1) Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth century prophets left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Graeco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.
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- 9) I don't believe you would so quickly commend the policemen if you would observe their ugly and inhuman treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you would watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you would see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you will observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I'm sorry that I can't join you in your praise for the police department.
- 10) I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,

Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Exercise Two – Correcting Faulty Parallelism

*Each of the following sentences has faulty parallelism. Rewrite the sentence to restore parallel balance. (Answer Key follows.)*

- 1) Gerard's counselor suggested that he should either consider working at a state environmental agency or taking a position with a not-for-profit green organization.
- 2) We've told you about the bombs, the fires, the smashed houses, and how the people were courageous.
- 3) The young boys ran down the hill, somersaulted across the lawn, and into the lake.
- 4) The duties of his job include keeping financial records, to prepare accurate reports, and participating in departmental meetings.
- 5) A national task force on education recommended improving public education by making the school day longer, raising teacher salaries, and increase integration of technology into the curriculum.
- 6) We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and so we can secure the Blessings of liberty to ourselves and to Posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution of the United States of America.
- 7) The designers of the new skyscraper were careful to consider not only aesthetics but also were concerned about safety.
- 8) The poll showed that most voters wanted more to hear the candidate's positions on the issues than listening to the candidate talk about "patriotism" and "moral values."

## Exercise Two: Answer Key - Correcting Faulty Parallelism

- 1) Gerard's counselor suggested that he should consider either working at a state environmental agency or taking a position with a not-for-profit green organization.
- 2) We've told you about the bombs, the fires, the smashed houses, and the courage of the people.
- 3) The young boys ran down the hill, somersaulted across the lawn, and jumped into the lake.
- 4) The duties of his job include keeping financial records, preparing accurate reports, and participating in departmental meetings.
- 5) A national task force on education recommended improving public education by making the school day longer, raising teacher salaries, and integrating more technology into the curriculum.
- 6) We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of liberty to ourselves and to Posterity, do ordain and establish this constitution of the United States of America.
- 7) The designers of the new skyscraper were careful to consider not only aesthetics but also safety.
- 8) The poll showed that most voters wanted more to hear the candidate's positions on the issues than to listen to the candidate's views on "patriotism" and "moral values."