

## CHAPTER 18

Parallelism, Variety,  
and Emphasis

## 18a What is parallelism?

When you write words, PHRASES, or CLAUSES within a sentence to match in their grammatical forms, the result is **parallelism**. Parallelism serves to emphasize information or ideas in writing. The technique relates to the concept of parallel lines in geometry, lines that run alongside each other and never meet. Parallelism delivers grace, rhythm, and impact.

The deer often come to eat their grain, the wolves to destroy their sheep, the bears to kill their hogs, and the foxes to catch their poultry.  
[The message of the multiple, accumulating assaults is echoed by the parallel structures.]

—J. Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur,  
*Letters from an American Farmer*

You gain several advantages in using parallel structures:

- You can express ideas of equal weight in your writing.
- You can emphasize important information or ideas.
- You can add rhythm and grace to your writing style.

Many writers attend to parallelism when they are REVISING. If you think while you're DRAFTING that your parallelism is faulty or that you can enhance your writing style by using parallelism, underline or highlight the material and keep moving forward. When you revise, you can return to the places you've marked.

## 18b What is a balanced sentence?

A **balanced sentence** is a type of parallelism in which contrasting content is delivered. The two parallel structures are usually, but not always, INDEPENDENT CLAUSES. A balanced sentence uses COORDINATION. The two coordinate structures are characterized by opposites in meaning, sometimes with one structure cast in the negative.

By night, the litter and desperation disappeared as the city's glittering lights came on; by day, the filth and despair reappeared as the sun rose.

—Jennifer Kirk, student



**ALERT:** Authorities differ about using a comma, a semicolon, or nothing between the parts of a short balanced sentence. In ACADEMIC

WRITING, to avoid appearing to make the error of a COMMA SPLICE, use a semicolon (or revise in some other way), as in the following sentence.

Mosquitoes don't bite; they stab. 

### 18c How do words, phrases, and clauses work in parallel form?

When you put words, PHRASES, and CLAUSES into parallel form, you enhance your writing style with balance and grace.

PARALLEL WORDS	Recommended exercise includes running, swimming, and cycling.
PARALLEL PHRASES	Exercise helps people maintain healthy bodies and handle mental pressures.
PARALLEL CLAUSES	Many people exercise because they want to look healthy, because they need to increase stamina, and because they hope to live longer.

### 18d How does parallelism deliver impact?

Parallel structures serve to emphasize the meaning that sentences deliver. Deliberate, rhythmic repetition of parallel forms creates an effect of balance, reinforcing the impact of a message.

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

—Martin Luther King Jr, “I Have a Dream”

If King had not used PARALLELISM, his message would have made less of an impact on his listeners. His structures reinforce the power of his message. A sentence without parallelism could have carried his message, but with far less effect: *Return to your homes in Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, or the northern cities, and know that the situation will be changed.*

Here's a longer passage in which parallel structures, concepts, and rhythms operate. Together, they echo the intensity of the writer's message.

You ask me what is **poverty**? Listen to me. Here I am, dirty, **smelly**, and with no “proper” underwear on and with the stench of my rotting teeth near you. I will tell you. Listen to me. Listen without pity. I cannot use your pity. Listen with understanding. Put yourself in my dirty, worn-out, ill-fitting shoes, and hear me.

**Poverty** is getting up every morning from a dirt- and illness-stained mattress. The sheets have long since been used for diapers. **Poverty** is living in a **smell** that never leaves. This is a **smell** of urine, sour milk, and spoiling food sometimes joined with the strong **smell** of long-cooked onions. Onions are cheap. If you have **smelled** this **smell**, you did not know how it came. It is **the smell** of the outdoor privy. It is **the smell** of young children who cannot walk the long dark way in the night. It is **the smell** of the mattresses where years of “accidents” have happened. It is **the smell** of the milk that has gone sour because the refrigerator long has not worked, and it costs money to get it fixed. It is **the smell** of rotting garbage. I could bury it, but where is the shovel? Shovels cost money.

—Jo Goodwin Parker, “What Is Poverty?”

**EXERCISE 18-1** Working individually or with a group, highlight all parallel elements of the Jo Goodwin Parker passage above in addition to those shown in boldface.

## 18e How can I avoid faulty parallelism?

**Faulty parallelism** usually results when you join nonmatching grammatical forms.

### Parallelism with coordinating conjunctions

The coordinating conjunctions are *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, *nor*, *yet*, and *so*. To avoid faulty parallelism, write the words that accompany coordinating conjunctions in matching grammatical forms.

**NO** Love *and* being married go together.

**YES** Love *and* marriage go together.

**YES** Being in love *and* being married go together.

### Parallelism with correlative conjunctions

Correlative conjunctions are paired words such as *not only . . . but (also)*, *either . . . or*, and *both . . . and*. To avoid faulty parallelism, write the words joined by correlative conjunctions in matching grammatical forms.

NO Differing expectations for marriage **not only can lead to disappointment but also makes the couple angry.**

YES Differing expectations for marriage **not only can lead to disappointment but also can make the couple angry.**

### Parallelism with *than* and *as*

To avoid faulty parallelism when you use *than* and *as* for comparisons, write the elements of comparison in matching grammatical forms.

NO **Having a solid marriage** can be more satisfying **than the acquisition of wealth.**

YES **Having a solid marriage** can be more satisfying **than acquiring wealth.**

YES **A solid marriage** can be more satisfying **than wealth.**

### Parallelism with function words

**Function words** include ARTICLES (*the, a, an*); the *to* of the INFINITIVE (*to love*); PREPOSITIONS (for example, *of, in, about*); and sometimes RELATIVE PRONOUNS. When you write a series of parallel structures, be consistent in the second and successive structures about either repeating or omitting a function word. Generally, repeat function words only if you think that the repetition clarifies your meaning or highlights the parallelism that you intend.

NO **To assign** unanswered letters their proper weight, **free** us from the expectations of others, **to give** us back to ourselves—here lies the great, singular power of self-respect.

YES **To assign** unanswered letters their proper weight, **to free** us from the expectations of others, **to give** us back to ourselves—here lies **the great, the singular** power of self-respect.

—Joan Didion, “On Self-Respect”

I have in my own life a precious friend, a woman of 65 **who has** lived very hard, **who is** wise, **who listens** well, **who has been** where I am and can help me understand it, and **who represents** not only an ultimate ideal mother to me but also the person I’d like to be when I grow up.

—Judith Viorst, “Friends, Good Friends—  
and Such Good Friends”

We looked into the bus, which **was** painted blue with orange daisies, **had** picnic benches instead of seats, and **showed** yellow curtains billowing out its windows.

—Kerrie Falk, student

**EXERCISE 18-2** Working individually or with a group, revise these sentences by putting appropriate information in parallel structures. For help, consult 18a through 18e.

**EXAMPLE** Difficult bosses affect not only their employees' performance but their private lives are affected as well.

Difficult bosses affect not only their employees' performance  
*but their private lives as well.*

1. According to the psychologist Harry Levinson, the five main types of bad boss are the workaholic, the kind of person you would describe as bullying, a person who communicates badly, the jellyfish type, and someone who insists on perfection.
2. As a way of getting ahead, to keep their self-respect, and for simple survival, wise employees handle problem bosses with a variety of strategies.
3. To cope with a bad-tempered employer, workers can both stand up for themselves and reasoning with a bullying boss.
4. Often, bad bosses communicate poorly or fail to calculate the impact of their personality on others; being a careful listener and sensitivity to others' responses are qualities that good bosses possess.
5. Employees who take the trouble to understand what makes their boss tick, engage in some self-analysis, and staying flexible are better prepared to cope with a difficult job environment than suffering in silence like some employees.

## 18f What are variety and emphasis in writing?

When you write sentences of various lengths and structures within a paragraph or longer piece of writing, you create **sentence variety**. Working in concert with sentence variety, **emphasis** allows you to add weight to ideas of special importance.

Using techniques of variety and emphasis adds style and clarity to your writing. Usually, the best time to apply the principles of variety and emphasis is while you are **REVISING**.

## 18g How do different sentence lengths create variety and emphasis?

To emphasize one idea among many others, you can express it in a sentence noticeably different in length from the sentences surrounding it. In the following example, a four-word sentence between two longer sentences carries the key message of the passage.

Today is one of those excellent January partly cloudies in which light chooses an unexpected landscape to trick out in gilt, and then shadow sweeps it away. **You know you're alive.** You take huge steps, trying to feel the planet's roundness arc between your feet.

—Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Sometimes a string of short sentences creates impact and emphasis. Yet, at other times, a string of short sentences can be dull to read.

**NO** There is a problem. It is widely known as sick-building syndrome. It comes from indoor air pollution. It causes office workers to suffer. They have trouble breathing. They have painful rashes. Their heads ache. Their eyes burn.

**YES** Widely known as sick-building syndrome, indoor air pollution causes office workers to suffer. They have trouble breathing. They have painful rashes. Their heads ache. Their eyes burn. [Many revisions are possible. This uses a long sentence to mention indoor air pollution and its victims; next, this retains the series of short sentences to emphasize each problem. Also, the conciseness of the revised version reduces 37 words to 27.]

Similarly, a string of COMPOUND SENTENCES can be monotonous to read and may fail to communicate relationships among ideas.

**NO** Science fiction writers are often thinkers, **and** they are often dreamers, **and** they let their imaginations wander. Jules Verne was such a writer, **and** he predicted spaceships, **and** he forecast atomic submarines, **but** most people did not believe airplanes were possible.

**YES** Science fiction writers are often thinkers and dreamers who let their imaginations wander. Jules Verne was one such writer. He predicted spaceships and atomic submarines before most people believed airplanes were possible.

## 18h How do occasional questions, commands, or exclamations create variety and emphasis?

The majority of sentences in English are DECLARATIVE—they declare something by making a statement. Declarative sentences offer an almost infinite variety of structures and patterns. For variety and emphasis, you might want to use three alternative types of sentences occasionally.

A sentence that asks a question is called INTERROGATIVE. Occasional questions, placed appropriately, tend to involve readers. A sentence that issues a mild or strong command is called IMPERATIVE. Occasional mild commands, appropriately used, gently urge a reader to think along with you. A sentence that makes an exclamation is called EXCLAMATORY. An occasional exclamatory sentence, appropriate to the context, can enliven writing, but you should use this sentence type only rarely in ACADEMIC WRITING.

### 18i How can modifiers create variety and emphasis?

MODIFIERS can expand sentences to add richness to your writing and create a pleasing mixture of variety and emphasis. Your choice of where to place modifiers to expand your sentences depends on the focus you want each sentence to communicate, either on its own or in concert with its surrounding sentences. Be careful where you place modifiers because you don't want to introduce the error known as a MISPLACED MODIFIER.

BASIC SENTENCE	The river rose.
ADJECTIVE	The <b>swollen</b> river rose.
ADVERB	The river rose <b>dangerously</b> .
PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE	The river rose <b>above its banks</b> .
PARTICIPIAL PHRASE	<b>Swelled by melting snow</b> , the river rose.
ABSOLUTE PHRASE	<b>Uprooted trees swirling away in the current</b> , the river rose.
ADVERB CLAUSE	<b>Because the snows had been heavy that winter</b> , the river rose.
ADJECTIVE CLAUSE	The river, <b>which runs through vital farmland</b> , rose.

**EXERCISE 18-3** Working individually or with a group, expand each sentence by adding each kind of modifier illustrated above.

1. We bought a house.
2. The roof leaked.
3. I remodeled the kitchen.
4. Neighbors brought food.
5. Everyone enjoyed the barbeque.

### 18j How does repetition affect variety and emphasis?

You can repeat one or more words that express a main idea when your message is suitable. This technique creates a rhythm that focuses attention on the main idea. Here's an example that uses deliberate repetition along with a variety of sentence lengths to deliver its meaning.

Coal is **black** and it warms your house and cooks your food. The night is **black**, which has a moon, and a million stars, and is beautiful. Sleep is **black**, which gives you rest, so you wake up feeling **good**. I am **black**. I feel very **good** this evening.

—Langston Hughes, “That Word *Black*”

## 18k How else can I create variety and emphasis?

### Changing word order

**Standard word order** in English places the **SUBJECT** before the **VERB**.

The **mayor** *walked* into the room. [*Mayor* is the subject, which comes before the verb *walked*.]

Any variation from standard word order creates emphasis. For example, **inverted word order** places the verb before the subject.

Into the room *walked* the **mayor**. [*Mayor* is the subject, which comes after the verb *walked*.]

### Changing a sentence's subject

The subject of a sentence establishes the focus for that sentence. To create the emphasis you want, you can vary each sentence's subject. All the sample sentences below express the same information, but the focus changes in each according to the subject (and its corresponding verb).

**Our study** *showed* that 25 percent of college students' time is spent eating or sleeping. [Focus is on the study.]

**College students** *eat or sleep* 25 percent of the time, according to our study. [Focus is on the students.]

**Eating or sleeping** *occupies* 25 percent of college students' time, according to our study. [Focus is on eating and sleeping.]

**Twenty-five percent of college students' time** *is spent* eating or sleeping, according to our study. [Focus is on the percentage of time.]

### Using a periodic sentence among cumulative sentences

The **cumulative sentence** is the most common sentence structure in English. Its name reflects the way information accumulates in the sentence until it reaches a period. Its structure starts with a **SUBJECT** and **VERB** and continues with modifiers. Another term for a cumulative sentence is *loose sentence* because it lacks a tightly planned structure.

For greater impact, you might occasionally use a **periodic sentence**, also called a *climactic sentence*, which reserves the main idea for the end of the sentence. This structure tends to draw in the reader as it moves toward the period. If overused, however, periodic sentences lose their punch.

<b>CUMULATIVE</b>	A car hit a shoulder and turned over at midnight last night on the road from Las Vegas to Death Valley Junction.
<b>PERIODIC</b>	At midnight last night, on the road from Las Vegas to Death Valley Junction, a car hit a shoulder and turned over.

—Joan Didion, “On Morality”