Grammatical Parallelism for Creating Sentences and Lists

—with credit to Joseph M. Williams, Style: the Basics of Clarity and Grace,
and Dr. Mardy Grothe—

What is Grammatically Parallelism?

Technical Writing documents and slides make frequent use of listing. Creating effective lists takes skill and practice. Effective lists are built using grammatical parallelism. Grammatical parallelism ensures every item in a list is *structurally alike*: made up of all the same kinds of words or phrases: for instance, all verb phrases, or all noun phrases, or all prepositional phrases, and so forth. As a **stylistic tool**, it creates **coherence** and **continuity** between each item in a list, helping audiences **grasp the logic** of a list more easily. When you make lists grammatically parallel, it prepares readers to anticipate **what's going to come next** and relate it to **what they just read**.

As a linguistic device, parallelism also appeals to readers aesthetically. The **persuasive power** of many speeches comes from presenting lists (of actions or things) in grammatically parallel ways:

- I have nothing to offer but **blood, toil, tears,** and **sweat.**→ **list made up of three nouns**
       Winston Churchill

- **To build** may have to be the slow and laborious task of years. **To destroy** can be the thoughtless act of a single day.   → **list of 2 actions phrased as two parallel verbs**

       Winston Churchill

- We shall **pay** any price, **bear** any burden, **meet** any hardship, **support** any friend, **oppose** any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty. → **list of 5 actions phrased as parallel verbs**

        John F. Kennedy

- **Travel** a thousand miles by train, and you are a brute; **pedal** five hundred on a bicycle, and you are a bourgeoise; **paddle** a hundred in a canoe, and you are a child of nature.
       Pierre Eliot Trudeau

Whether in an in-sentence list or in an offset bulleted/ numbered list, grammatical parallelism highlights that, structurally and logically, things belong together, *that they can all be classified as the same kind of thing*. Grammatical equivalence thus reflects conceptual equivalence: parallel ideas or things are mirrored in grammatically parallel words or phrases, enhancing logic and channeling an audience's attention.

For example, the following list presents three grammatically parallel **prepositional phrases**:

- The stream runs **under** the culvert**, behind** the embankment*,* and **into** the pond**.**

The following list by employs three grammatically parallel **–ing phrases**:

- **Reading** a source**, analyzing** its use of evidence**, and evaluating** its credibility will help you determine effective sources for your research.

- **Filling** the gas tank**, testing** the windshield wipers*, and* **checking** tire pressure are essential to preparing for a long trip.

Grammatically parallel elements may run to **words**, **phrases**, or **longer clauses** as shown in the example below:

- Teachers should remember **that students are** vulnerable to ego-bruising moments, **that they do** not yet grasp their own imminent adulthood, **that they are** still developing, not fully developed.

> **The same principle of grammatical parallelism applies to bulleted or enumerated lists as well, and you'll need to pay special attention to this when listing points on your PowerPoint slides**

Problems with Faulty Parallelism

Maintaining grammatical parallelism can be tricky. **Faulty parallelism** occurs when listed items are not presented in grammatically equivalent forms:

- The protestors tried **shouting, threats,** and **pleading** *(Faulty→ mix of different verb forms)*
- The protestors tried shout**ing**, threaten**ing**, and plead**ing** *(Correct → all the same verb forms)*

- The workers **read the offer, then it was discussed, and they decided to accept it.** *(Faulty)*
- The workers **read** the offer**, discussed** it**,** and **decided** to accept it. *(Correct)*

  The following recommendations were made regarding the Committee's position statement:
    1 **Stress that** this statement applies to all districts
    2 **Start the** statement with "If the Ministry continues . . ."
    3 **The statement should** emphasize that it applies to both trustees and principals
    4 **Such strong words** as *obligation, owe*, and *must* should be replaced with words that are less harsh *(Faulty → each item in the list begins with mix of noun and verb forms)*

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CORRECTING FAULTY Either/ Or Conjunctions:

Faulty parallelism can be particularly challenging when used with **correlative conjunctions** (*either/ or . . .* and *not only*). Here, you need to ensure that the statements following both *either* and *or* are grammatically parallel (take exactly the same form):

- You may travel to the new plant either **by train** or **there is a plane. (Faulty)**

- You may travel to the new plant either **by train** or **by plane**. **(Correct)**

- You may travel to the new plant by either **train** or **plane**. **(Correct)**

CORRECTING FAULTY Not Only . . . but also Conjunctions :

Here, you need to ensure that the statements following *not only . . . but also* conjunctions are likewise grammatically parallel (take exactly the same form):

- We are not only **responsible to our faculty members** but also **to our students (Faulty)**

- We are responsible not only **to our** faculty members but also **to our** students **(Correct)**

- We are not only **responsible to** our faculty members but also **beholden to** our students **(Correct)**

- You need to get not only **a new textbook** but also **you should** get a new binder. **(Faulty)**

- You need to get not only **a new** textbook but also **a new** binder. **(Correct)**

- You not only **need to get** a new textbook, you also **need to get** a new binder. **(Correct)**

> **Please review additional Web Resources under Week 2 of my CourseSpaces site. If you've got any questions about the principles explained on this handout, please check with me for assistance, as it will form part of the upcoming Midterm Quiz**