

## The Item in a Series

Recognize an *item in a series* when you see one.

Items in a series occur whenever a sentence includes a list of two or more things. The items can be any type of grammatical unit, such as **nouns**, **verbs**, **participles**, **infinitives**, or **subordinate clauses**, to name a few. Read the examples that follow:

To make her famous muffins, Paulette bought fresh broccoli, baker's chocolate, flour, sugar, and eggs.

Broccoli, chocolate, flour, sugar and eggs = all nouns.

After Chad *clutched* his heart, *swooned*, and *fell* to the floor, Mrs. Borglum nudged him with her foot, ordering him to the front of the class to make his

speech.

**Clutched**, **swooned**, and **fell** = all verbs.

When Harold saw his girlfriend Gloria across the crowded airport, he sprinted toward her, *leaping* over luggage, *colliding* with travelers, and *dodging* potted palms.

**Leaping**, **colliding**, and **dodging** = all present participles.

Because Tara is hungry but broke, she hopes *to spot*Anthony in the cafeteria, *flirt* with him over a pizza, and then *get* the poor boy to pay for the meal.

**To spot**, **to flirt**, and **to get** = all infinitives.

My dog Floyd bolts under the bed whenever thunder booms, strangers knock on the door, or I reach for the flea shampoo.

Whenever thunder booms, whenever strangers knock on the door, and whenever I reach for the flea shampoo = all subordinate clauses.

Maintain parallel structure with items in

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## a series.

Items in a series should have parallel structure. You maintain parallel structure when you use equal grammatical units. If the first item is a noun, then the following items must also be nouns; if the first item is a subordinate clause, then so must the other items be.

Nonparallel structure looks like this:

Harry spent his afternoon



Harry spent his afternoon playing tennis, returning overdue library books, and then he ate a mushroom and pineapple pizza.

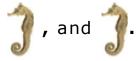
Parallel structure, the correct way to list items in a series, looks like this:

Harry spent his afternoon



Harry spent his afternoon





Harry spent his afternoon playing tennis, returning overdue library books, and eating a mushroom and pineapple pizza.

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This afternoon, Harry *played* tennis, *returned* overdue library books, and *ate* a mushroom and pineapple pizza.

## Punctuate items in a series correctly.

Whenever you have three or more items in a series, each item requires punctuation to separate it from the others. Depending on the complexity of the list, you can use either commas or **semicolons**.

The most common pattern looks like this:

Here are some examples:

To survive another boring art history lecture, you **should drink** a strong cup of coffee before class, **empty** sugar packets into your mouth when Dr. Lemon has his back turned, **and sharpen** a pencil to poke yourself in the thigh.

Stephanie refuses to go waterskiing with us because she is afraid of *getting* sliced by the boat propeller, *tangling* with a snake, *becoming* an alligator's lunch, *or having* a brainsucking amoeba crawl up her nose.

Some handbooks will tell you that the comma

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before the last item in the series—the *serial* comma—is unnecessary. Although you do have the option of leaving it out, the editorial policy of many magazines, newspapers, and book companies is to use a comma before the **coordinating conjunction**. You will, as a result, notice its presence in many of the professional publications you read.

Use semicolons to separate the items when they already include commas. The pattern looks like this:

```
ITEM + , + more information + ; +
ITEM + , + more information + ; +
and + ITEM + , + more information
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## Check out these examples:

My heroes are *Batman*, who combines brains and brawn; *Captain Picard*, who commands respect; *and Wiley Coyote*, who never gives up.

What a day! Poor Veronica spent *the morning* cooking, cleaning, and washing; *the afternoon* running errands, grocery shopping, and studying; and this evening ironing, making lunches, and brushing the dog.



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