



Printer Fabulous!

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

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  ,
 , and .

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

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:

ITEM + , + ITEM + , + and + ITEM

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 water-skiing 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 brain-sucking amoeba crawl up her nose.

Some handbooks will tell you that the comma

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

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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