

Handout Topic: Parallelism

What is parallelism?

Parallelism (or parallel construction) refers to the use of similar grammatical structures to express coordinate elements or ideas. Words, phrases, and clauses should be parallel when they perform similar functions in a sentence. Parallel elements that appear in a sentence in a non-parallel form often disrupt the reader and may cause confusion.

e.g. Manny likes tennis, hockey, and to play soccer. (faulty parallel structure)

In the example above, the final item in the series takes on a verb form, whereas the first two items appear as nouns. The verb can be changed to a noun, or the two items that appear as nouns can be changed to verbs; either is preferable to the sentence as it appears above.

e.g. Manny likes tennis, hockey, and soccer.

e.g. Manny likes to play tennis, to play hockey, and to play soccer.

e.g. Manny likes to play tennis, hockey, and soccer.

Make sure that a preposition or article that applies to one item in a series applies to rest of the items as well. In a short sentence, prepositions and article can often be omitted from all but the first item in a parallel series. It is never incorrect to include them, however.

e.g. The placement tests were taking place in Ottawa, Vancouver, Winnipeg, and in St. John's. (faulty)

e.g. The placement tests were taking place in Ottawa, Vancouver, Winnipeg, and St. John's. (parallel; repeated preposition *in* omitted)

e.g. The placement tests were taking place in Ottawa, in Vancouver, in Winnipeg, and in St. John's. (parallel; repeated preposition *in* included)

Correlative expressions (e.g. both, and; not only, but also; either, or; etc.) should also be followed by the same grammatical construction.

e.g. A time not for words, but action (faulty)

e.g. A time not for words, but for action (parallel)

e.g. My objections are the injustice of the proposal and that it is unconstitutional. (faulty)

e.g. My objections are that the proposal is unjust and that it is unconstitutional. (parallel)

Exercises: Correct the following sentences so that they achieve a parallel structure.

1. My presentation was just as effective as Rob.

2. Whether I drive or walk will depend on how long it will take, how I'm feeling, and the weather.

3. The politician was criticized for not wanting to lower taxes, inexperience in elected office, and for his remarks at the meeting.

4. Our professor wants us to complete this assignment in an efficient manner, neatly, and quickly.