

## PARALLEL STRUCTURE

Whenever you have two or more related ideas you should try to express them in the same grammatical form. By using parallelism, you make it easier for your reader to understand the connection.

Good writers frequently use parallelism to create powerful sentences:

The chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken.  
-Samuel Johnson

### THE BASIC PARALLELISM RULE

**Items linked with a coordinator (and, but, or, etc.)  
should have the same grammatical form.**

Unparallel: Thomas enjoys basketball and playing golf.

Parallel: Thomas enjoys basketball and golf.

In a series of three or more items, you will probably only find a coordinator between the final two items, but all the items must still have the same form. Think of the earlier items as being linked by an implied coordinator.

Unparallel: I typed my resume, printed out several copies of it, and was sending them to prospective employers.

Parallel: I typed my resume, printed out several copies of it, and sent them to prospective employers.

Note that while the basic phrase types must be the same, the internal structure of the phrase can vary. You can add things like adjectives, adverbs, or required elements without hurting the parallelism.

Parallel: I bought a dictionary and a textbook that was written for beginners.  
She showered, ate breakfast, and made herself a sandwich for lunch.

The first example links two noun phrases; the second, three verb phrases, and that's all that's grammatically required.

**EXERCISE 1**

Fix the parallelism problems in the following sentences.

1. Drama and singing in the chorus are my favorite after-school activities.

delete

2. Brandon treats all his friends with respect, dignity, and loyally.

loyalty

3. Painting a house with brushes is much more time consuming than to paint it with a spray machine.

painting (also possible: change "Painting" to "to paint")

4. When Eunice was finished with her long day at work, she went to the gym, the grocery store, and went home.

to the gym, the grocery store, and her house (Note that just deleting "went" leaves a non-parallel structure.)

5. Disturbed by the loud racket outside, Mrs. Krebopple closed the front door, shut all the windows, and put in earplugs.

correct

6. When asked what she would like to do for a living, Melanie replied that she would like to be a doctor or dancing.

dancer (also possible: a dancer)

7. The television show is poorly written, horrifically acted, and it is entirely pointless.

delete

8. Max's parents sat him down and told him what to do to succeed in life and the things not to do.

what

9. Running is an activity that Patrice enjoys, but to ski is her favorite.

skiing

10. I would like to travel abroad for the next year or doing an internship at a top law firm.

intern

CORRELATIVE COORDINATORS

A correlative coordinator is similar to a simple coordinator, but it consists of two or more words. Correlative coordinators make the coordinator more emphatic. Here are some correlative coordinators:

both...and  
either...or  
neither...nor  
not (only)...but also

There are others, ranging from the truly obscure (“or . . . or”) to the more common (“just as . . . so too”).

The basic parallelism rule applies to items joined with correlative coordinators as well, but you must pay careful attention. It’s easy to overlook parallelism breaks in such sentences, especially when the sentence is long.

Unparallel: I would like to either earn some extra money this summer by working part-time at the mall or to get ahead on my academic skills by attending summer school.

Notice that an item outside the correlative (to) is repeated inside the 2nd correlative. Because the 1st part reads fine, it’s easy to overlook the redundancy.

**Test technique: To check parallelism more easily,  
draw brackets around each part of the conjoined pair.**

Example: I would like to either [earn some extra money this summer by working part-time at the mall] or [to get ahead on my academic skills by attending summer school].

With the brackets, it’s easy to see that the second *to* is unnecessary.

Usage Note: Not only...but (also)

When you present alternatives with *not only*, you must usually conclude the pattern with *but also* (or *but* and a phrase of equivalent meaning, e.g., *too*, *as well*, etc.). The only time you should not include *also* or its equivalent is if the two parts of the construction are in a degree relationship.

*Also* Required: Stanley is not only an accomplished pianist but also a skilled golfer.

The *also* is required in this sentence because “pianist” and “golfer” are very different. They are not in a degree relationship.

No *Also*: Stanley's test results reveal he is not only intelligent but brilliant.

The *also* is not required in this sentence because "brilliant" is a degree of "intelligent."

If *not only...but (also)* joins two clauses, the subject and verb in the first clause will be inverted. This is mandatory word order, not a parallelism break.

Example: *Not only* did they break into his office, *but* they *also* destroyed his manuscript.

## **EXERCISE 2**

**Fix the parallelism problems in the following sentences. Some sentences may be correct as written.**

1. My little sister not only likes but loves her doll collection, and she will do anything to protect it.

Correct

2. Saying you are a nice person is one thing, but to act like a nice person is another.

acting

3. Griselda decided to spend the rainy day cleaning her house, baking cookies, and read her book.

reading

4. The movie we just watched was both hilarious and it terrified me.

terrifying

5. For the holidays I would like to either go home to visit my family or to rent a cabin in the mountains and enjoy the snow.

delete

6. Troy loves not only playing chess but also computer games.

also playing (or: Troy loves playing not only chess but also computer games.)

7. If you are interested in participating in this project, submit your information to Regina and you should be waiting for her to get in touch with you.

wait

8. Volcanoes are some of the most terrifying and magnificent wonders of our restless planet.

Correct

9. When the bell rang, Robyn quickly gathered her supplies, shoved them into her backpack, and was running out the door.

ran

10. Mason had a difficult time keeping up good grades in his college courses, especially physics, chemistry, and the subject of biology.

Delete