

WAC Writing Guides: PARALLELISM

Parallel structure means that two (or more) sentence elements-- words, phrases, or clauses --have the same function and grammatical structure in a sentence. Parallelism adds clarity, balance, and symmetry to a sentence—or to a whole passage. Tip: Check for parallelism in a sentence by writing the items to be paralleled in a column, on a separate, parallel lines (like the equal sign =)

Parallel words and phrases:

- He enjoys **reading, fishing, and hiking** in the woods. (3 *-ing* verb forms)
- During the exam, we were instructed **to read** the article, **to take** notes about our responses, and **to write** a short essay. (3 phrases)

Parallel clauses:

- The company is looking for employees **who are reliable, who express themselves well, and who show initiative.**

Faulty parallelism occurs when the grammatical forms don't all match.

- He enjoys **reading, fishing, and to hike** in the woods. (2 *-ing* verb forms (gerunds) + (to-) verb (infinitive) don't match)
- A good leader has **creativity, wisdom, and knows how** to get along with people. (2 nouns + verb phrase don't match)

Use parallelism in these cases:

Three or more items in a series:

- The cooks prepared **fish, chicken, and beef** for the feast.
- He **crashed** the party, **drank** all the punch, **ate** some finger sandwiches, and **left** without a word.

Closely related, paired ideas linked by a coordinating conjunction (*and, but, or, yet, so, for, not*) or a semicolon:

- In the years since Hurricane Katrina, many residents have spent all their time **gutting their homes and rebuilding their lives.**
- **Some parts of the city were spared, but most areas were devastated.**
- Some parts of the city were spared; most areas were devastated.

Closely related, paired ideas linked by correlative conjunctions (*either . . . or, neither . . . nor, not only . . . but also, both . . . and, whether . . . or*). Make sure that the sentence elements that follow directly after the correlative conjunctions match:

- **Correct:** He was told *either to leave* the meeting *or to turn* off his cell phone.
- **Faulty:** He was told *either* to leave the meeting *or* he was told to turn off his cell phone.
- **Correct:** The city was devastated *not only by the hurricane's ferocious winds, but also by the flooding* caused by the levee breaks.
- **Faulty:** The city was devastated *not only by the hurricane's ferocious winds, but also the levee breaks* caused catastrophic flooding.

Comparisons linked with *than* or *as*:

- **Correct:** For many New Orleanians, **buying** a home in another part of the city is a better option *than trying* to rebuild a ruined structure.
- **Faulty:** For many New Orleanians, **buying** a home in another part of the city is a better option *than to try* to rebuild a ruined structure. (verb forms do not match)