

MPC English & Study Skills Center

Parallel Structure

Parallelism

Groups of words, phrases, or clauses used in a series or as comparisons should be in **parallel (the same) grammatical form**. Correct use of **parallelism**, or **parallel structure**, makes written work smoother to read and ideas easier to understand.

The objective is to achieve a balance in the grammatical forms, using words with words, phrases with phrases, and clauses with clauses.

Examples:

Milla's bag contains **an apple, a brush, and a pack of gum**.

After running four miles, Ona **took a shower, changed clothes, and ate lunch**.

Ideas in a Series

As you write, it's important to pay attention to parallel structure; make sure that when words or groups of words are listed in a series, they are listed in a similar grammatical format.

Incorrect: Sue decided to buy **pens, paper, and she also bought highlighters** for school.

The last group of words in the series, "she also bought highlighters," does not match (is not parallel to) the first two.

Correction: Sue decided to buy **pens, paper, and highlighters** for school.

Here's another example: Rudy loves to **swim in the pool, draw pictures, and taking naps** during the summer.

The last group of words in the series, "taking naps," does not match (is not parallel to) the first two groups. Notice the word "taking" ends in "-ing," whereas the other actions, "swim" and "draw," do not.

Correction: Rudy loves to **swim in the pool, draw pictures, and take naps** during the summer.

One last example of a series: In order to succeed, students must **do their homework, learn to write, and you should take careful notes.**

The last group of words in the series, “you should take careful notes,” does not match (is not parallel to) the first two groups. Notice that the first two word groups are making statements about students and referring to students with the word “they,” but the last set of words in the series suddenly becomes a command addressing the students directly with the word “you.”

Correction: In order to succeed, students must **do their homework, learn to write, and take careful notes.**

Ideas in Pairs

Presenting paired ideas in the same grammatical forms emphasizes their connection. There are three different ways in which paired ideas are usually presented:

- Using a coordinating conjunction, such as *and*, *but*, or *or*
- Using correlative conjunctions, such as *either...or* or *not only...but also*
- Using a word that introduces a comparison, such as *than* or *as*

Coordinating Conjunction

Incorrect: Failure to take care of a cold can result in a longer illness or even getting pneumonia.
Note that “getting pneumonia” is a phrase paired with a single word, “illness.”

Correction: Failure to take care of a cold can result in a longer illness or even pneumonia.

Correlative Conjunction

Incorrect: Grandma was not only a great cook but also was an excellent quilter.
Watch the word order; the “was” after “but also” is out of balance. The word groups “a great cook” and “an excellent quilter” are the paired items.

Correction: Grandma was not only a great cook but also an excellent quilter.

Comparisons with *than* or *as*

Incorrect: It may be easier to run a marathon than taking care of a dozen children.
Note the shift from a phrase starting with “to” to a phrase starting with an “ing” word.

Correction: It may be easier to run a marathon than to take care of a dozen children.

Incorrect: Wise people say that giving is as much fun as to receive, but I sometimes doubt it.
Note the comparison of “giving” with “to receive” is out of balance.

Correction: Wise people say that giving is as much fun as receiving, but I sometimes doubt it.