



## Parallelism

Parallelism means that a list of ideas should be expressed in similar grammatical constructions: Single words should be balanced with single words, phrases should be balanced with phrases, and clauses should be balanced with clauses (as in this sentence).

- Parallel noun structures: *For breakfast every morning I like **cereal** (noun), **bananas** (noun), and **tea** (noun).*
- Parallel gerund structures: *She won medals in **swimming**, **fencing**, and **running**.*
- Parallel phrases: *John **stood up**, **spoke eloquently**, and **sat down**.*
- Parallel clauses: *A good speaker should **be witty**, **be interesting**, and **be brief**.*

Problems with parallelism happen when one element does not match the others.

- *A drunk driving conviction can result in **a fine** (noun), **a jail sentence** (noun), or **losing your license** (gerund phrase, where the verb ends in *-ing*).*
- The sentence could be made parallel by converting all the items to nouns:  
*A drunk driving conviction can result in **a fine**, **a jail sentence**, or **a suspended license**.*

In another example:

- *Her lazy son only likes **eating** (gerund), **sleeping** (gerund), and **to watch TV** (infinitive phrase).*
- The first two elements are gerunds (see above), while the last one is an infinitive (a verb plus the word “to”). The sentence could be made parallel by converting all the items to gerunds:  
*Her lazy son only likes **eating**, **sleeping**, and **watching TV**.*

The next sentence is also not parallel, but for a different reason:

- *John got up, he spoke for a while, and sat down.*
- The first two segments contain both a subject and a verb, while the third has a verb but no subject. John did three things: got up, spoke, and sat down. All three should be expressed in the same grammatical structures:  
*John got up, spoke for a while, and sat down.*

If you are having trouble determining which parts of a sentence are being used equivalently and thus need to be parallel, try looking for coordinating conjunctions (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so* (hint: remember FANBOYS)). These connective words link similar ideas together, and are therefore good clues for identifying words or phrases that must be parallel.

Correlative conjunctions always work in pairs and provide excellent clues about the need for parallelism.

Correlative conjunctions include *either/or, neither/nor, not only/but also, both/and*, and *whether/or*.

- If a sentence connects a pair of like ideas with either coordinating or correlative conjunctions, both items in the pair must be expressed using the same grammatical structures.
- Examples:

NOT PARALLEL: *The machine accepts not only coins, but also a token.* (*Coins* is plural, but *a token* is singular.)

PARALLEL: *The machine accepts not only coins, but also tokens.* (*Coins* and *tokens* are both plural nouns.)

NOT PARALLEL: *I can either fix it cheap or I can fix it fast, but not both.* (*Cheap* is an adjective, but *I can fix it fast* is a complete clause. The *either / or* construction incorrectly makes them equal in this sentence.)

PARALLEL: *I can either fix it cheaply or quickly, but not both.* (*Cheaply* and *quickly* are both adverbs and both words modify the verb *fix*.)