

FAULTY PARALLELISM

Many sentences contain parallel thoughts, for example, "Lee had a great time scuba-diving and water-skiing on her vacation." Scuba-diving and water-skiing are parallel thoughts; that is, they are both things that Lee had a great time doing. By expressing both of them with -ing words, the sentence emphasizes this parallelism. A clumsier way of saying the same thing might be, "Lee had a great time scuba-diving, and also she water-skied during her vacation." The two parallel thoughts are expressed in non-parallel forms of words, and the sense of their parallel relationship is weakened.

1. When elements are parallel in thought, use parallel forms to express them.

cooking, eating, cleaning

to cook, to eat, to clean

have cooked, have eaten, have cleaned

pretty, tall, friendly

2. Balance a noun with a noun, a verb with a verb, a modifier with a modifier, etc.

Whenever possible, words of the same kind should be used to do the same jobs in a sentence.

She is charming and beautiful.

In this sentence, charming, an -ing word, is balanced with beautiful. They are in parallel structure, however, because they are both modifiers; that is, they both describe a person.

Incorrect: She is charming and has beauty.

Both phrases describe her, but charming is a modifier, whereas beauty is a noun. Therefore, the sentence has now lost its parallel structure.

Incorrect: We like tacos and to eat enchiladas.

Tacos is a noun; to eat enchiladas is a combination of a verb form and a noun. Is this sentence in parallel structure?

We like tacos and enchiladas.

Does this sentence have parallel structure? What words are parallel? What kind of words are they?

We like to eat tacos and enchiladas.

Although this sentence may appear to have faulty parallelism, it actually does have parallel structure. In this case, tacos and enchiladas are objects of the verb to eat. What do we like to eat? We like to eat tacos, and we also like to eat enchiladas.

3. Use parallel construction for words joined by such connectors as and, but, nor, or.

I enjoy reading, writing, and conducting experiments in a laboratory.

Note that the three elements are all -ing words. This sentence contains proper parallelism.

Incorrect: Our baby is cute and behaves well.

In this example, the parallelism is faulty. Cute is a modifier; behaves well is a form of a verb. This sentence may be rewritten as follows:

Our baby is cute and well-behaved.

4. Use parallel structure with such constructions as either. . .or, neither. . .nor, not. . . but, not only. . .but also, both. . .and.

Incorrect: Either going for a ride or to lie in the sun is my idea of a good time.

This sentence may be rewritten:

Either going for a ride or lying in the sun is my idea of a good time.

Incorrect: Not only was he a great man, but also an excellent writer.

What is wrong with the parallelism here? Was he a great man contains both a subject he and a verb was; and excellent writer contains neither. This is an especially common error. The sentence may be rewritten as:

He was not only a great man but also an excellent writer.

Now the subject and verb have been moved out of the parallel sections, and there is proper parallelism between a great man and an excellent writer.

or

Not only was he a great man, but he was also an excellent writer.

Now each clause has a subject and a verb; again there is proper parallelism.

5. Parallel groups of words in a sentence must have parallel structure.

Incorrect: I promise to be a good husband and that I will help clean the apartment.

The two groups of words do not have a parallel structure in this sentence. One begins with the to form of a verb, and the other does not. This sentence may be rewritten as follows:

I promise that I will be a good husband and that I will help clean the apartment.

Now the two elements are parallel. Note how the form of the first has been changed to go along with the second.

Incorrect: By changing the oil myself, and because I know how to do tune-ups, I save money on the care of my car.

Again, the two separate elements of this sentence do not coincide. There is no parallel structure. The sentence may be rewritten as follows:

By changing the oil myself and by doing my own tune-ups, I save money on the care of my car.

She got a new job with a higher salary, increased benefits, and she also works fewer hours than

before.

may be changed to

Incorrect: She got a new job with a higher salary, increased benefits, and fewer hours.

Source: Troubleshooting: Basic Writing Skills by Herman and Young. 1978. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

PARALLELISM SELF-CHECK

I. Circle the word or phrase in the parentheses that maintains the parallel structure in each sentence.

1. I enjoy working hard, getting paid well, and (to get a sense of satisfaction, achieving a sense of satisfaction).
2. He admitted to robbing the store and (escaping in the green Ford, that he escaped in the green Ford).
3. She achieved her fame by working hard and (having good luck, she was lucky).
4. Terry hates to get up in the morning, to brush his teeth, and (combing his hair, to comb his hair).
5. I admire his talent, his ambition, and (his ability to keep cool, he was able to keep cool).
6. The drummer kept the beat, the guitarist played the melody, and (the singing was done by the piano player, the piano player sang).
7. She went either with my sister, with my brother, or (by herself, alone.)
8. The bull was snorting and (charging at us, started to charge at us).
9. In grammar school, I learned to read, to write, and (arithmetic, to do arithmetic).
10. My aunt was charming, helpful, and (kind, always doing kind things).

Answers

1. achieving a sense of satisfaction
2. escaping in the green Ford
3. having good luck
4. to comb his hair
5. his ability to keep cool
6. the piano player sang
7. by herself
8. charging at us
9. to do arithmetic
10. kind

II. Cross out the element in each series that is not parallel.

1. standing in line
to cash a check
speaking to my friend
2. on my own
in the forest

- looking out for bears
3. tall
handsome
with brown hair
 4. looking outside
was in the room
wanted to open the window
 5. on the beach
in a tent
making a fire
 6. to put on slippers
reading the newspaper
smoking a pipe
 7. by raking the leaves
mowing the lawn
by trimming the shrubs
 8. sturdy
made of wood
has compartments for pencils
 9. green eyes
a long, curling tail
on the sofa
 10. to have a good time
carrying her baby
walking through the park

ANSWERS:

1. to cash a check
2. looking out for bears
3. with brown hair
4. looking outside
5. making a fire
6. to put on slippers
7. mowing the lawn
8. sturdy
9. on the sofa
10. to have a good time