Parallel Structure

Good parallel structure makes writing much clearer. If the different parts of a sentence have the same grammatical structure, the sentence is easier to understand. Everything from items in a list to full sentences should be parallel.

Comparisons

In comparisons, parallelism means comparing like things. Compare actions to actions, adjectives to adjectives, and objects to objects.

Incorrect: I like swimming more than Xbox.
Correct: I like swimming more than playing Xbox.

“Swimming” is not the same type of thing as “Xbox”: the first is an action and the second is an object. The key to fixing it is adding another gerund to match “swimming,” so that the sentence compares two actions.

Lists

When a sentence has lists of gerunds or infinitives, they must all be the same type:

Incorrect: She likes to walk the dog, go horseback riding, and to ski.
Correct: She likes walking the dog, riding horses, and skiing.
Correct: She likes to walk the dog, to ride horses, and to ski.

This example illustrates that there are two correct ways to format this sentence while maintaining parallelism. The incorrect sentence includes two infinitives (“to walk” and “to ski”) and one gerund (“riding”). The first correct sentence shows us that it is correct to make all the verbs gerunds. The second correct sentence shows us that it is also correct to make all the verbs infinitives. It does not matter which one is chosen, as long as it is a logical choice, and as long as each element of the sentence matches.

The same goes for adverbs and adjectives: when you can make them the same, you should.

Incorrect: The student spoke softly and was uncertain.
Correct: The student spoke softly and uncertainly.

The incorrect sentence above is an example of an adjective and an adverb being used to describe the student. In order for the sentence to be grammatically correct and to not be confusing, “was uncertain” needs to become an adjective to match the first modifier of the sentence (“softly”).
Coordinating Conjunctions
Coordinating conjunctions join parallel structures. When using a coordinating conjunction, you are establishing a balance between the structure prior to and following the coordinating conjunction. To help you remember the coordinating conjunctions, think of FANBOYS—*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so*.

*Nonparallel:* He *plays* guitar, she *sings*, and drums and synths *are played.*
*Revised:* He *plays* guitar, she *sings*, and they *play* drums and synths.

The example above joins three independent clauses around “and”—a coordinating conjunction. In the incorrect version, two of the independent clauses are in active voice and one of them is in passive voice. The correct version puts all three independent clauses in active voice. Here’s another example:

*Nonparallel:* I enjoy *eating* Italian and Chinese dishes, but I like to *cook* Mexican food.
*Revised:* I enjoy *eating* Italian and Chinese dishes, but I like *cooking* Mexican food.

Try to maintain consistency across sentences joined by coordinating conjunctions. The first sentence switches from the gerund to the infinitive, whereas the second sentence uses two gerunds. Here’s a little challenge for you: revise the sentence to use the infinitive instead of the gerund.

Parallelism in Correlative Conjunctions
Correlative conjunctions act in the same way as coordinating conjunctions. When we see a correlative conjunction, we know that the sentence or phrase is comparing or contrasting. Some correlative conjunctions are *both/and, neither/nor, not only/but also, either/or, not/but, and whether/or.*

*Incorrect:* Not only does the movie have car chases but also motorcycle racing.
*Correct:* Not only does the movie have car chases but *it also has* motorcycle races.
*Correct:* The movie *has* not only car chases but also motorcycle *races*.

The incorrect sentence above uses the *not only/but also* correlative conjunction, but the sentence is not balanced on either side of it. The second clause does not match the first clause, because it makes the noun “race” into a gerund verb (“racing”).

In order for the sentence to be correct, the verb must be made into a noun by adding the word “races” after “motorcycle.” Additionally, the second clause of the sentence does not have equal weight, because it breaks form from the first clause. The second clause needs to include “it has” to balance the first clause. In this way, the clauses before and after the second part of the correlative conjunction (“but also”) hold equal weight and are parallel.

Of course, moving the subject and verb outside of the “not only…but also” pair makes the process of correcting simpler: All that needs to happen is for “racing” to change to “races” to match “chases.”

The University of Texas at Dallas Writing Center
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Parallelism can be tricky business, but maintaining parallel structure will make your writing much clearer. Come talk to a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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