

Writing Center Handouts

Parallelism

Parallel structure is the concept that each element within a list should grammatically mirror the others. Failure to observe parallel structure can cause contextually confusing, stylistically awkward, and grammatically incorrect sentences.

Basic Example

- Consider the following correct example, from George Orwell's 1984: Winston corrects the articles, changes the headlines, and destroys the evidence.
- The sentence begins with the subject, a noun. Each subsequent three-word phrase is grammatically parallel, a present-tense verb followed by a definitive article followed by a plural noun.

Clauses with Longer Explanations

- One idea in a series, however, may need more explanation than the others. In this scenario, put the longer phrase after the conjunction. Consider the following example, from Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*:

After retreating, Paul and his comrades press an improvised counterattack, pass the former frontline, overrun the French defenses, and stop the unexpected advance only to drink the water used for cooling the enemy's now-silent guns.

- The clause with additional information appears at the end of the sentence. Each noun and verb match in tense. For example, "press", "pass", "overrun", and "stop" are all in present tense. If the sentence was written with some verbs in past and others in present, the reader would not understand the time in which things are taking place.

Parallelism Beyond Lists

- Parallel structure is not limited to lists. The concept can be applied to the two parts of compound sentence. This allows the connection between two ideas to come off stronger. Consider the following example, discussing Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:

Kurtz becomes a pervasive enigma, festering among the ample folds compacted in Marlow's ripening imagination—and Marlow becomes an embattled vessel, struggling with the confusing messages elicited by The Congo's meandering course.

- The two ideas are parallel. Each half constitutes the same parts of speech in the same order. Keeping consistent with the order that grammatical elements appear helps the reader follow the train of ideas.