

Parallel Structure

Parallel structure is the use of similar constructions for similar concepts. In a sentence, words, phrases, and clauses equal in thought should use the same grammatical structures.

Notice below how writer Alice Bloom emphasizes the attributes and activities of a woman she observes on a Greek island. What makes Bloom's description memorable is not just her detail and diction but also her use of parallel structure:

She looks, at once, as if she could do everything she's ever done, anything needed...She probably can't read, or write; she may never in her life have left this island; but she is beautiful. She could crush you, love you, mend you, deliver you of child or calf or lamb or illusion, bleed a pig, spear a fish, wring a supper's neck, till a field, coax an egg into life...

Here are some other examples of parallel structures and their types:

1. He was neat, clean, shaved, and sober. (parallel adjectives)
2. We studied the island's natural history, geography, and economy. (parallel nouns)
3. The new technologies can scan, digitize, and store permanently any text so that other machines can retrieve this content and reproduce copies anywhere in the world. (parallel verbs)
4. "Revision is the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." (parallel *-ing* phrases) [from Adrienne Rich]
5. "Gamblers tend to be superstitious, to favor certain clothes, to finger lucky charms, and above all, to believe in their luck." (parallel infinitive phrases) [from THE NEW YORKER]
6. "She was sitting behind a black glass desk that looked like Napoleon's tomb, and she was smoking a cigarette in a black holder that was not quite as long as a rolled umbrella." (parallel independent clauses) [from Raymond Chandler's *Trouble is My Business*]
7. "Personally I love Crazy Horse because even the most basic outline of his life shows how great he was; because he remained himself from the moment of his birth to the moment he died; because he knew exactly where he wanted to live and never left; because he may have surrendered, but he was never defeated in battle; because he never met the President; because he never rode on a train; because he never wore a medal or a top hat or any other thing that white men gave him; because he made sure that his wife was safe before going to where he expected to die." (parallel dependent clauses) [from Ian Frazier's *Great Plains*]

The important point to remember is that once you begin a particular kind of construction in a series of items, you must continue that type of construction.

HOW SHOULD I EDIT MY WRITING FOR PARALLEL STRUCTURE?

- *Use parallel structure when using the connecting words **FOR, AND, NOR, BUT, OR, YET, SO** when they link constructions in compounds and series.*

Example: The frontal lobes of the human brain grow **AND** develop. (Here the **AND** connects two verbs.)

Example: The frontal lobes of the human brain develop after birth, **AND** their development is not complete until approximately the age of 7. (Here the **AND** connects two independent clauses.)

Example: Even temporary use of growth hormones by teenage athletes can cause mood swings, severe aggression, **AND** impaired judgment. (Here the **AND** connects a list of nouns.)

- *Use parallel structure when using the connecting words **EITHER...OR; NEITHER...NOR; BOTH...AND; NOT ONLY...BUT ALSO; NOT...BUT**. The words and/or phrases following these connecting words should use the same grammatical construction.*

Example: “Western novels **NOT ONLY** tell stories from the man’s point of view **BUT ALSO** concentrate on male-male relationships.” (Here the connecting words **NOT ONLY...BUT ALSO** connect verb phrases.) [from *West of Everything* by Jane Tompkins]

- *Use parallel structure when using the connecting words **NOT; AS WELL AS; RATHER THAN; LESS THAN; MORE THAN; FROM...TO; INSTEAD OF**.*

Example: High-pitched sounds **AS WELL AS** sudden movements terrify horses. (Here, noun phrases are connected by **AS WELL AS**.)

Example: She is taller **THAN** I am. (Here, independent clauses are linked with **THAN**.)

For practice, rewrite the following sentences to eliminate nonparallel structure:

1. At the age of fifty, she took up drinking, gambling, and smoked cigarettes.
2. After years of intense thought, I developed a satisfying exercise program: before breakfast, I hum; after lunch, I nap; and after dinner, coffee is drunk.
3. Whenever environments change, species either adapt, or they will die.
4. Anthropologists study, examine, and they do a lot of speculating about why humans have evolved monogamy as a mating system.
5. Our environment includes the air we breathe, the food we eat, the family we grow up in, and what culture we belong to.