Parallelism

This handout explains parallelism and offers examples of this technique. Using parallelism (parallel structure) is both a grammatical convention and a sophisticated writing device. When listing a series of items, writers often use a conjunction between two items (stadium football and arena football) and use commas when more than two items are named (the Indy 500, the Brickyard 400, and Formula 1). Items in such a series should be parallel; that is, all of the items have to be equal—to be expressed in the same grammatical form. For example, the items are all noun phrases or are all prepositional phrases. Using parallel structure leads to smooth, consistent, and coherent writing.

Commonly, writers should check for parallelism in the following:
- lists which follow a colon
- outlines
- headings and sub-headings
- resumes
- compound expressions
- bulleted lists, as in presentations

In the following examples, note the items in a series:
When we evaluated the motors, we considered not only the initial cost but also the maintenance cost.

> two nouns (modified): the initial cost
> the maintenance cost

Before any specific plan is adopted, a number of concerns must be addressed, including equity between employees, benefit options, attitudes of employees, and expense.

> four nouns/noun phrases:
> equity between employees
> benefit options
> attitudes of employees
> expense

Medical offices have attempted to decrease the number of patients who fail to keep their appointments by studying the reasons for missing appointments, the types of patients who break appointments, and the strategies used by some doctors’ offices to solve the problem.

> 3 noun phrases: the reasons for missing appointments
> the types of patients who break appointments
> the strategies used by some doctors’ offices to solve the problem

Businesses can boost employee morale if they keep the organization interesting, welcome new ideas, recognize effort, have responsible leaders, support personal growth, and promote a sense of belonging in the employees.
6 verb or predicate phrases:
  keep the organization interesting
  welcome new ideas
  recognize effort
  have responsible leaders
  support personal growth
  promote a sense of belonging in the employees

Offering the best Southwestern cuisine and serving the hottest salsa were the restaurant’s two goals.

2 gerunds (-ing form of the verb):
  Offering the best Southwestern cuisine
  serving the hottest salsa

In compound expressions, items are connected by coordinating conjunctions (such as and, but, or, nor), by paired coordinating conjunctions (such as not only . . . but also), and by phrases (such as more than and rather than) that indicate a comparison.

3 prepositional phrases:
  by coordinating conjunctions (such as and, but, or, nor),
  by paired coordinating conjunctions (such as not only . . . but also),
  by phrases (like more than and rather than, that indicate a comparison).

The examples below show how parallelism improves the original sentences:

Not parallel: He could not tell when the project would begin, the completion date, or who would work on it.
Parallel: He could not tell when the project would begin, what the completion date would be, or who would work on it.

Not parallel: Dr. Reynolds had to decide if the newly discovered object was a star, a planet, or classified as some other type of celestial body.
Parallel: Dr. Reynolds had to decide if the newly discovered object was a star, a planet, or some other type of celestial body.

Not parallel: Smiling takes fewer muscles than to frown.
Parallel: Smiling takes fewer muscles than frowning.

Not parallel: At opening night at the Tex-Mex restaurant, the manager called the servers together to be sure they understood all the items on the menu, could pronounce fajitas, and that they would remember to ask, “Salt or no salt?” when customers ordered margaritas.
Parallel: At opening night at the Tex-Mex restaurant, the manager called the servers together to be sure they understood all the items on the menu, could pronounce fajitas, and would remember to ask, “Salt or no salt?” when customers ordered margaritas.