

Parallel Structure

What is Parallel Structure?

Parallel Structure, also known as **Parallelism**, is a balance within one or more sentences of similar phrases or clauses that have the same grammatical structure, like things in a list. The use of parallel structure is essential for good writing, helping to add clarity and strength to your writing.

If parallel structure sounds confusing, no worries; this handout will make things much clearer.

Like the lines on the interstate, parallel structure prevents grammatical traffic collisions. In other words, if you use parallel structure in your writing, it will result in clearer communication to your reader.



How Do You Check for Parallel Structure?

Make sure that every part of the sentence has the same kind of structure. Let's look at some examples together.

Mike's favorite activities are reading, writing, and playing the tuba.

In this sample sentence, we see that Mike's favorite activities all match one another: reading, writing, and playing are all the same kind of word, **verbs** with an **-ing** ending.

Let's look at another way to write the sentence and still maintain parallel structure:

Mike's favorite activities are to read, to write, and to play the tuba.

This time, the sentence is parallel because the activities all match, **to + a verb**.

How Do You Make Sentences Have Parallel Structure?

(-) incorrect (+) correct

(-) The sneaky boy **filched** a cookie from the kitchen, and then he **will swallow** it in one gulp.
"Filched" is in the past tense, but "will swallow" is in the future tense.

(+) The sneaky boy **filched** a cookie from the kitchen, and then he **swallowed** it in one gulp.
Both verbs are in the past tense.

(-) Matthew and John **are preparing** for Luke's birthday party while Mark **did** little or nothing.
"Are preparing" is in the present tense, and "did" is in the past tense.

(+) Matthew and John **are preparing** for Luke's birthday party, while Mark **is doing** little or nothing.
Both verb phrases are in the present tense.

Practice Exercises

Before deciding whether or not the following sentences have correct parallel structure, remember what we just reviewed. Look out for verb tense agreement, especially with verbs in a list. In the sentences below, circle the words that should be in parallel structure. If the circled words do not match, revise the sentence to make it correct.

Example:

Caitlyn likes to read, to write, and dance.

The sentence is incorrect.

Caitlyn likes to read, to write, and to dance. OR Caitlyn likes reading, writing, and dancing.

Practice Sentences

1. Jumping, sprinting, and throwing the javelin are three activities involved in track and field.
2. Marsha said that she would either go to see a movie or go to the park.
3. Moe and Hank are planning to carpool to the party, to dance, and attending the after party.
4. Bob had an active life: he swam twenty laps, ran five miles, and lifted weights every day.
5. To walk in another man's shoes is knowing him.
6. To teach is to inspire young minds.
7. Stephen's mom complained that he had too many bad habits: he would never clean up his room, brush his teeth, or vacuuming the house.

Answers:

1. (Jumping), (sprinting), and (throwing) the javelin are three activities involved in track and field. = **correct**

2. Marsha said that she would either (go to see a movie) or (go to the park). = **correct**

3. Moe and Hank are planning (to carpool to the party), (to dance), and (attending the after party). = **incorrect**

Moe and Hank are planning to carpool to the party, to dance, and to attend the after party.

4. Bob had an active life: he (swam) twenty laps, (ran) five miles, and (lifted) weights every day. = **correct**

5. (To walk) in another man's shoes is (knowing) him. = **incorrect**

To walk in another man's shoes is to know him.

OR

Walking in another man's shoes is knowing him.

6. (To teach) is (to inspire) young minds. = **correct**

7. Stephen's mom complained that he had too many bad habits: he would never (clean up) his room, (brush) his teeth, or (vacuuming) the house. = **incorrect**

Stephen's mom complained that he had too many bad habits: he would never clean up his room, brush his teeth, or vacuum the house.