



The Importance of Parallelism, or One of These Things is Not Like the Other—and It’s Wrong.

In our writing careers, we’ve all strung together lists of words, phrases, or clauses. With the help of commas and coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, so, yet), we’ve added depth and variety to our work by hooking together different ideas in a single sentence. But we must be careful not to play fast and loose with our listing; we must always keep the idea of **parallelism** grounded firmly in the forefront of our minds.

What is parallelism? Parallelism—or parallel structure—simply means using the same grammatical pattern or structure when listing two or more words, phrases, or clauses. We use parallelism for aesthetic purposes as well as to demonstrate that the ideas under discussion have the same level of importance.

Let’s try parallelism on for size, shall we?

Elaine is an avid outdoorswoman and a big fan of sports. We want to talk about what outdoor activities or sports she likes. We have some options for structuring our list.

1. We can use the gerund form (-ing) of the verbs she enjoys:

EX: Elaine likes mountain biking, kayaking, and playing softball.

Notice the repeated gerund form: **biking**, **kayaking**, and **playing**. That’s parallelism at work!

2. We could also use the infinitive form of the verbs:

EX: Elaine likes to mountain bike, to kayak, and to play softball.

When using infinitives, you can drop the “to” after the first verb:

EX: Elaine likes to mountain bike, kayak, and play softball.

3. Parallelism is important in the past tense, too:

EX: Elaine biked ten miles, kayaked down river, and played softball until after sunset.

4. Verbs aren't the only words that require parallelism. We want to use parallel structure with adverbs and adjectives as well.

EX: Elaine approaches the outdoors cautiously and cheerfully.
Notice the use of adverbs (cautiously and cheerfully) to describe the way in which Elaine approaches the outdoors. This structure is parallel because all three words are of a similar type.

Here's an **unparallel** example of the previous sentence:

EX: Elaine approaches the outdoors cautiously and with a cheerful attitude.

Uh-oh! The use of the prepositional structure (**with** a cheerful attitude) breaks the parallelism setup.

Check out these examples of parallelism in the following sentences:

EX: Before a long hiking trip, Elaine tells her friends that they should get a good night's sleep, wear a high SPF sunscreen, and bring plenty of water.

EX: Elaine expected that she would meet her group at the head of the trail, that everyone would have packed their own supplies, and that they would start the hike promptly at noon.

5. If you start in the active or passive voice, stay in that voice. Here's an **unparallel** example of voice switching:

EX: The hikers would carry their own supplies to the campground, would treat the campsite respectfully, and their trash would be carried out when they left.

The last item in the list is in the passive voice. To make it parallel, we would switch it to the active voice:

EX: The hikers would carry their own supplies to the campground, would treat the campsite respectfully, and would carry their trash out when they left.

6. Remember to maintain parallel structure after a colon as well:

EX: Elaine uses the outdoors for two main purposes: to find her true self and to strengthen her physical body.

An **unparallel** example of the following sentence might go like this:

EX: Elaine uses the outdoors for two main purposes: finding her true self and to strengthen her physical body.