Parallelism

**Parallel Structure:** Parallel structure means using the same pattern of words, phrases, or clauses to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance. Single words should be balanced with single words, phrases with phrases, and clauses with clauses. Verbs should match each other in number (singular or plural), tense, and form.

**Do not mix verb forms or tenses!**

- Peter Pan likes flying, swimming, and dueling.
  - This sentence is parallel because all of the verbs are in the same form (gerund form: ending in *ing*).
- The Lost Boys work hard, sang well, and will be playing hard.
  - This sentence is NOT parallel because the verb forms and tenses are not the same. The sentence should read: The Lost Boys work hard, sing well, and play hard; The Lost Boys will be working hard, playing hard, and singing well; or worked and played hard and sang well.
- Wendy likes to cook, to tell stories, and she sometimes likes sewing.
  - This sentence is NOT parallel because the first two verbs are in the same form (infinitive form: *to __*), but the last verb is in a different form (gerund form: *__ing*) and is in a clause.

**Test parallelism:** One way to test parallelism of a list is by finishing the sentence with each item as if it were the only item in the list.

**Example:**

Captain Hook was scared of being eaten by the crocodile, being killed by Peter, and being considered ridiculous by his crew.

Test:

- Captain Hook was scared of being eaten by the crocodile.
- Captain Hook was scared of being killed by Peter.
- Captain Hook was scared of being considered ridiculous by his crew.

This list is parallel!
Example of a nonparallel list:

Smee was responsible for controlling the crew, he trimmed Captain Hook’s moustache, and to tie up the captives.

- Smee was responsible for controlling the crew.
- Smee was responsible for trimming Captain Hook’s moustache.
- Smee was responsible for tying up the captives.

This sentence is not parallel, because all of the items in the list do not follow the pattern of the first item in the list. The sentence should read: Smee was responsible for controlling the crew, trimming Captain Hook’s moustache, and tying up the captives.

In Lists after a Colon: Be sure to keep all the elements in a list in the same form.

- Tinkerbell wanted only three things: to send Wendy home, to keep Peter in the Neverland, and to make a fabulous new dress for herself.

All of the items in the list are in the same form, so they are all parallel in structure.

Remember not to use a colon before a list if the list follows such as, like, or including.

Parallel structure is really a matter of balance. Balancing a sentence can be compared to balancing a scale if one pretends that certain words (conjunctions such as and, or, but, nor) are the balancing points. One part of speech or of a sentence can be balanced only by one (or a series) of the same kind.

- Unbalanced: Tootles doesn’t like flying at night, but to walk is okay.
- Balanced: Tootles doesn’t like flying at night, but walking at night is okay.
- Unbalanced: Either Tinkerbell sprinkles fairy dust on Peter now or risk him getting caught by the crocodile.
- Balanced: Either Tinkerbell sprinkles fairy dust on Peter now or she risks his getting caught by the crocodile.
- Unbalanced: Peter wasted time by looking at his shadow for too long and not studying the map enough.
- Balanced: Peter wasted time by spending too much time looking at his shadow and not enough time studying the map.

All items in a list should be balanced, i.e., they should all be adjectives, verbs, adverbs, etc., and should all be words, phrases, or clauses, but not a mixture.

- Unbalanced: Never Never Land is mysterious, enchanted, and it is hard to get to.

In this list of three descriptors of Never Never Land, two are adjectives (mysterious and enchanted) and one is an independent clause (it is hard to get to).

- Balanced: Never Never Land is mysterious, enchanted, and hard to get to.
Test Your Knowledge of Parallel Structure!

See if the sentences below are parallel or not. If not, how could they be corrected so they are parallel?

1. Wendy kept sewing Peter’s shadow to his body so he wouldn’t get into trouble, mischief, and keeping better track of him was hard.
2. Peter Pan found that most of the Lost Boys wanted to explore on their own rather than maps.
3. On Captain Hook’s ship, laziness could result in suspension or even expulsion from the crew.
4. John Darling found that it is easier to draw than writing when using burnt sticks.
5. Adventures are fun; fights with pirates are exciting; sleeping under the stars is magical; but home is best.
6. Singing a song or dancing a dance was the path to Tiger Lily’s happiness.
7. Cook tried to make her strawberry soufflé fluffy, rich, and delicate.
8. Nana revels in chewing bones, walking through the neighborhood, and avoids bath time.

Answers!

1. Wendy kept sewing Peter’s shadow to his body so he wouldn’t get into trouble, mischief, and keeping better track of him was hard.
   Not parallel! The elements connected by the conjunction and are not in the same form. Wouldn’t get into trouble is a verb phrase; mischief a noun; and keeping better track of him was is another verb (gerund—ending in ing) phrase.
   Fix (one option): Wendy kept sewing Peter’s shadow to his body was so he wouldn’t get into trouble or mischief and so she would be able to keep better track of him.
2. Peter Pan found that most of the Lost Boys wanted to explore on their own rather than maps.
   Not parallel! The reasons being compared are not in the same form. To explore is a verb, but maps is a noun.
   Fix: Peter Pan found that most of the Lost Boys wanted to explore on their own rather than use maps to find their way.
3. On Captain Hook’s ship, laziness could result in suspension or even expulsion from the crew.
   Parallel! Both nouns here are balanced and in the same form (suspension and expulsion).
4. John Darling found that it is easier to draw than writing when using burnt sticks.
   Not parallel! The verb forms do not match.
   Fix: It is easier to draw than to write when using burnt sticks.
5. Adventures are fun; fights with pirates are exciting; sleeping under the stars is magical; but home is best.
   Parallel! The sentence is made up of four clauses, separated with semicolons; each clause uses the same structure of a noun, a verb, and an adjective.
6. Singing a song or dancing a dance was the path to Tiger Lily’s happiness.
   Parallel! Both verbs are in the same form.
7. Cook tried to make her strawberry soufflé fluffy, rich, and delicate.
   Parallel! Each item in the list is an adjective.
8. Nana revels in chewing bones, walking through the neighborhood, and avoids bath time.
   Not parallel! Nana revels in chewing bones works, Nana revels in walking through the neighborhood works, but Nana revels in avoids bath time does not work.
   Fix: Nana revels in chewing bones and walking through the neighborhood, but she hates taking baths.


Some examples based: http://rhetoric.byu.edu/figures/p/parallelism.htm / http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/gram_parallelism.html