
Section Objectives:

- Students will be able to define *parallel structure* as it relates to words, phrases, and clauses.
- Students will be able to recognize parallel structure in words, phrases, and clauses.
- Students will be able to construct a paragraph using parallel structure.

Using Parallel Structure in Writing

After his conquest of what would later become the British Isles, Caesar is reported to have declared, “Veni, vidi, vici,” which is Latin for “I came, I saw, I conquered.” In both languages, these statements are excellent examples of **parallel structure**, or **parallelism**. The pronoun *I* is repeated and is followed by the past-tense form of a verb. Parallel structure is the repetition of patterns of words, phrases, or clauses in language. Most writers do this automatically but it can be overlooked, particularly when writing a long essay.

When writing, avoid mixing forms. This will help you to create parallel structure.

Mike likes to dance, to swim, and skateboarding.

In the sentence above, the first two items in the list are **infinitives**, which are composed of the word *to* and the verb, but the last item is a **gerund**, which is a form of a verb that usually ends in *-ing*. To make this sentence parallel, all of the terms should be gerunds *Mike likes dancing, swimming, and skateboarding* or infinitives, *Mike likes to dance, to swim, and to skateboard*.

This is true no matter which form is being used or whether it is a single word, a phrase, or a clause. It is also important to remain consistent in terms of tense, voice, and person:

My mom told me to run the vacuum, take out the garbage, and make sure my room is cleaned.

The sentence above does not demonstrate parallel structure because the third phrase, *make sure my room is cleaned*, is in the **passive voice**, but the other two phrases, *run the vacuum* and *take out the garbage*, are in the **active voice**. In the active voice, the subject performs the action, whereas in the passive voice the subject receives the action. All of the phrases need to be in the same voice for the sentence to be parallel:

My mom told me to run the vacuum, take out the garbage, and clean my room.

This is true as well for verb tenses:

After dinner, Laura finished her homework, made her lunch for the next day, and will put her laundry away.

In the example above, the sentence is not parallel, because the first two phrases, *finished her homework* and *made*



The human brain finds repetitive patterns, like the one above, pleasing. This is true for patterns in language as well.

her lunch for the next day, are in the past tense but the final phrase, *will put her laundry away*, is in the future tense. All of the phrases need to be in the same tense for the sentence to be parallel:

After dinner, Laura finished her homework, made her lunch for morning, and put her laundry away.

Many of the most famous quotations are famous not just because of what they say, but because the structure of the quotation is memorable. Often, this means it uses parallel structure. Note that good speakers and writers do not use parallel structure in just their sentences. They also use parallel structure throughout their writing. Look at the following example from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Notice the parallel structure in the second paragraph: *But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground*. Here, Lincoln utters three clauses, all structured in the same fashion and all using very similar wording. However, Lincoln's parallel structure is not limited to just this sentence. Close reading of the speech demonstrates that Lincoln uses repetition throughout the text. For example, he repeats the word *dedicate* or *dedication* seven times throughout the speech. This kind of repetition is a **rhetorical device**, a way to use language to convince your audience of something or to affect their emotions. Lincoln also ends his speech with an excellent example of parallel structure, and a description of the United States government that many people still use: "government of the people, by the people, for the people [...]"

Use three steps to revise your writing for parallel structure.

1. Look for the conjunctions *and* and *or*. Make sure words, phrases, and clauses on either side of these words are parallel.
2. Look at any sentence that lists two or more terms. Write all the terms out on a separate piece of paper to see if they are constructed in a parallel fashion.
3. Read your writing aloud. Although it can be difficult to see parallel structure when reading, it is very easy to hear.

Read the following sentences. Mark any sentence that uses parallel structure correctly with a **C**. Rewrite any sentence that does not use parallel structure correctly.

1. Ms. Constantine is the best history teacher ever. She uses slide shows, movie clips, and interviews to make history come alive.
2. Biking, swimming, and reading are my favorite summertime activities.
3. Learning how to cook, speak French, and writing well are my goals for the next year.
4. Smoking, drinking, and cheating are all ways to ruin your future.
5. *Once Upon a Time* is my favorite TV show because it has drama, love, and many suspenseful scenes in every episode.
6. My little brother constantly talks over me, interrupts me, and throws paper balls at my friends.
7. A poor student often talks, misses homework, and is failing.
8. I love hanging out with my friends, especially when we are just talking, laughing, and we play video games.
9. Hunter took the textbook, threw it in his desk, and yelled, "School's out for the summer!"
10. Ms. Sanderson is nice, kind, and smart.