



THE WRITING CENTER

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Parallelism

Parallelism, or parallel structure, refers to the use of similar grammatical patterns. Parallel structure is used to avoid unnecessary repetition and to show that two or more clauses, phrases, and words have equal value.

1. **When listing a series of items in a sentence, construct each item in a similar (parallel) way. For example:**

With the -ing form (gerund):

Brutus likes reading, running, and watching movies.

With infinitives:

Brutus likes to read, to run, and to watch movies.

However, this sentence is not parallel:

Brutus likes reading, running, and to watch movies.

This sentence is not parallel because two of the items are in the gerund form (-ing) while the third item is in the infinitive form (to + verb).

Here is another example:

Parallel:

Brutus wrote the letter quickly, neatly, and beautifully.

Not Parallel:

Brutus wrote the letter quickly, neatly, and in beautiful language.

In this sentence, two of the items are adverbs (“quickly” and “neatly”) and the third item is a prepositional phrase (“in beautiful language”).

2. **The rules for parallelism also apply if the sentence contains a colon.**

Parallel:

Brutus displays traits that are typical of university mascots: energetic, cheerful, spirited, and friendly.

Not Parallel:

Brutus displays traits that are typical of university mascots: energetic, cheering on the team, spirited, and a good friend.

3. **Clauses should be used consistently in parallel sentences.**

Parallel:

Brutus told the crowd to stand up, raise their hands, and cheer for the team.

Not Parallel:

Brutus told the crowd to stand up, raising their hands, and cheering for the team.

4. Tips on proofreading for parallelism.

Separating each item into its own sentence is an easy way to check for parallelism.

For example:

Today, Brutus will study economics, Spanish, and write a paper.

Today, Brutus will

- *study economics*
- *Spanish*
- *write a paper*

Brutus will study economics. Brutus will Spanish. Brutus will write a paper. Two of these sentences make sense, but “Brutus will Spanish” does not.

The sentence could also be separated in this way:

Today, Brutus will study

- *economics*
- *Spanish*
- *write a paper*

Brutus will study economics. Brutus will study Spanish. Brutus will study write a paper. Again, two of these sentences make sense, but “Brutus will study write a paper does not.”

Here is the parallel sentence:

Today, Brutus will study economics, study Spanish, and write a paper.

In this sentence, we can separate each item into individual sentences that all make sense.

Today, Brutus will study economics.

Today, Brutus will study Spanish.

Today, Brutus will write a paper.