



# What is Parallel Structure? - Definition & Examples

## Lesson Transcript

This lesson will explain what parallel structure is and present examples of it. It will also provide you with direction on how to use this literary technique and how to find and fix issues with parallel structure.

## Definition

'If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl. But whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.' Martin Luther King Jr. is credited with this infamous quote, but what makes it appealing to the reader? Is it his use of repetition, with the word, 'can't?' What about the certain rhythm that his word choice presents? These techniques are what make this quote a great example of parallel structure.

Using the same pattern of words to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance is the definition of **parallel structure**.

Parallel structure is repetition of a certain form, which provides balance and clarity in your writing. It can also be used as an effective technique by highlighting important information or as a way to emphasize powerful points in your writing.

## Examples

Let's take a look at a basic example of a sentence that uses parallel structure.

- 'Louise will swim, bike, and run this weekend at her triathlon.'

All three verbs in this sentence are in the same tense, or form. This creates a smooth flow to the sentence as opposed to the one below, which is lacking in parallel structure.

- 'Louise will be swimming, then bike, and run this weekend in her triathlon.'

The use of 'ing' in the word 'swimming' does not match the other verb forms in the sentence. Below is another example of parallel structure:

- 'Daniel spent his Sunday afternoons cooking chili, watching football, and napping.'

This example is not parallel structure:

- 'Daniel spent his Saturday afternoon cooking chili, then he watched football, and took a nap.'

In addition, in parallel structure, it is important to group similar ideas and items when you have short phrases that can be put together. Take a look at the example below.

- 'Joseph bought a jacket. Joseph bought a pair of shoes. Joseph also bought a tie.'

These three sentences are all dealing with the same topic, and can be combined using parallel structure.

- 'Joseph bought a jacket, a pair of shoes, and a tie.'

All the items in this example are nouns. Also remember that commas are placed after each noun with the exception of the last item.

## Using Parallel Structure

When you combine two or more phrases or clauses, you will use a **coordinating conjunction**. Remember that conjunctions are words like 'and,' 'or,' 'but,' 'yet' and 'so' that connect two parts of a sentence.

**Correct:** I took my girlfriend out swimming *and* dancing.

**Incorrect:** I took my girlfriend out to swim *and* dancing.

The diagram shows two sentences. The first sentence is labeled 'Correct' and shows 'swimming' and 'dancing' connected by 'and'. The second sentence is labeled 'Incorrect' and shows 'to swim' and 'dancing' connected by 'and'. Blue arrows point from the 'and' in the correct sentence to the 'and' in the incorrect sentence, and from the 'to swim' in the incorrect sentence to the 'swimming' in the correct sentence, illustrating that the units being connected are not parallel in the incorrect version.

You can also use **correlative conjunctions** to combine two phrases or clauses. Correlative conjunctions come in pairs, such as 'not only' and 'also', 'or' and 'neither', 'if' and 'then'. You will need to have equal grammatical units after both parts of the conjunction.

**Correct:** My dog wants *not only* treats *but also* wants bones.

**Incorrect:** My dog *not only* wants treats *but also* bones.

The diagram shows two sentences. The first sentence is labeled 'Correct' and shows 'not only' followed by 'wants treats' and 'but also' followed by 'wants bones'. Blue curved arrows connect 'not only' to 'wants treats' and 'but also' to 'wants bones', showing that both parts of the conjunction have the same grammatical unit ('wants'). The second sentence is labeled 'Incorrect' and shows 'not only' followed by 'wants treats' and 'but also' followed by 'bones'. Blue curved arrows connect 'not only' to 'wants treats' and 'but also' to 'bones', showing that the grammatical units are not parallel ('wants treats' vs 'bones').

Parallel Structure is also important in a displayed list of items.

**Correct:** This exercise program will help you:

1. Establish a daily workout routine
2. Create solutions for lack of motivation
3. Determine what your health and fitness goals should be

**Incorrect:** This exercise program will help you:

1. Establish a daily workout routine
2. Coping with times you lack motivation
3. To be fit and healthy

## Fixing Problems with Parallel Structure

So, how can we fix grammatical errors with parallel structure? One of the easiest and most effective proofreading techniques is to simply read a piece of writing out loud. Hearing the flow of the sentence structure oftentimes reveals a lack of continuity in writing, and an error in parallel structure may be to blame.

While reading aloud, do you hear the same kinds of sounds? For example, if there is a series of verbs, are they all in same tense? Can you identify a repetition of sounds or phrases? If something does not sound cohesive, take a closer look at the parallel structure.

If a lack of parallel structure exists, you will need to exchange the item that does not match the others. Remember that parallel structure will exist if you are including a list of actions or items. These items should maintain the same part of speech. For example, if one is a verb, they should all be verbs of the same tense, or if one is a noun, they all should be nouns.

## Lesson Summary

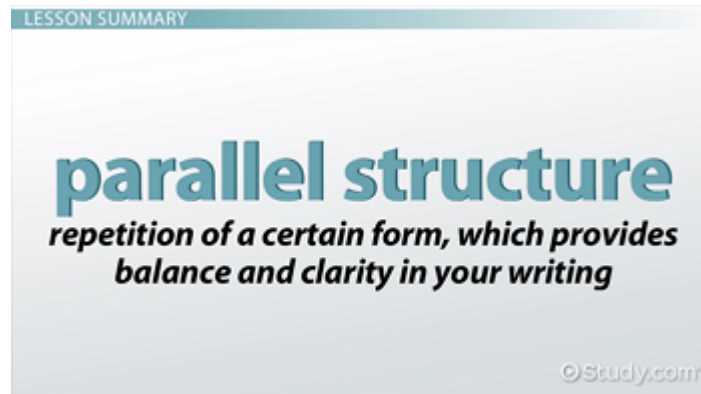
**Parallel structure** is repetition of a certain form, which provides balance and clarity in your writing. In the quote 'if you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl. But whatever you do you have to keep moving forward,' can you identify the parallel structure? If you determined that the consistent verb tenses created the parallel structure, you are correct!

“If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl.”

When using parallel structure in your writing, remember not to mix forms; be consistent with your verb tense and double check to ensure your items or actions in a list are all nouns. Reading aloud is an effective strategy to identify any errors that may exist with your parallel structure.

Parallel structure is vital in your writing in order to produce a piece of work with clarity and readability. Consistency is the key, and your readers will be thankful for the ease in which they will be able to absorb and understand your writing.

## Points to Remember



- Parallel structure provides balance and clarity to writing.
- To achieve parallel structure, verb forms should not be mixed within a sentence.

## Learning Outcomes

All of the information included in this lesson on parallel structure is designed to help you to:

- Define parallel structure
- Consider the effect of parallel structure on a piece of writing
- Create parallel structure within sentences and lists
- Practice using parallel structure and correcting related grammatical errors

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