UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Student Success Centre

Parallelism and Lists

This handout will explain the concept of parallelism as it applies to lists, series and parallel pairs. List lead-ins and punctuation will also be covered. Each section will be accompanied by examples of the concepts covered. At the end of the handout there will be a challenge exercise with solution key.

Parallelism in lists and series

When presenting a series of two or more similar items (such as items in a list, duties in a job description, steps in a procedure, or entries in a glossary), you should aim to write all items in the series using the same (aka parallel) structure. Correct parallel structure is demonstrated in the following examples:

Example 1:

Sentence 1: He loved **to travel, to read, to sail,** and **to play** volleyball.

Sentence 2: He loved to **travel, read, sail,** and **play** volleyball.

In the example above, note that the repetition of "to" in sentence 1 is a stylistic choice. Writers may choose to repeat elements to add emphasis or to improve the rhythm or readability of a sentence. It is your choice whether or not you wish to repeat sentence element, but it is important to be consistent with your choices.

Example 2:

Sentence 1: We recommend **implementing** the proposed plan and **reviewing** it annually.

Sentence 2: We recommend that you **implement** the proposed plan and **review it** annually.

In the example above note that whereas sentence 1 used the participle ("-ing") form of the verb for both items in the list, sentence 2 used a simple verb form. Again, either choice is acceptable, the important factor is maintaining parallel forms.

Lead-ins

In any list, make sure that all the listed items flow logically and grammatically from the words leading into the list.

Example:

Bulleted and numbered lists should be

- logical
- grammatically parallel
- clearly readable

Notice how, in the example bulleted list above, the lead-in to the list, "should be," would form a complete grammatically correct sentence with each list item, on its own.

Problem items

If one item in a list resists the parallel pattern, try including it in the lead-in to the list or in the following sentence. Consider the following example of incorrect parallel structure within the list.

Example of incorrect parallelism:

This plan is, transparent, economical, **easy to implement** , and effective.

In the example above, consider how difficult it would be to change the phrase "easy to implement" into a one-word adjective to fit into the pattern of the list. Including the phrase "easy to implement" in the lead-in to the list will solve this problem as the following example of a corrected version of the sentence demonstrates.

Example of corrected sentence:

Besides **being easy to implement**, this plan is **transparent, economical,** and **effective.**

Punctuation for lists

When introducing a list, you should **only use a colon (:)** before the list **if the lead-in could stand as a complete sentence on its own**.

If the lead-in to a list could **not** stand as an independent sentence, then it should not be followed by any punctuation. For an example of this, see the inset list under in the "Crafting lead-ins" section above.

Parallel pairs

Be sure to use parallel structure when using the following pairs:

"Either/or"; **"both/and"**; and **"not only/but also"**. Parallel structure should also be used for words occurring before and after "as well as".

Here are a few examples:

Example 1:

The committee studied **not only** the original option, **but also** four new design options.

Example 2:

They **not only** studied the original option, **but also** considered four new design options.

Example 3:

The committee studied **both** the original option **and** four new design options for the bridge.

Example 4:

The committee studied the original option **as well as** four new design options for the bridge.

The examples above all convey the same information, but they are structured differently to maintain correct parallel structure in each instance.

Note: Avoid using "both" with "as well as" when you have just two items, as is demonstrated in the following example of incorrect parallel structure.

Example:

The committee studied **both** the original option **as well as** four new design options.

Practice exercise:

Now that you know the rules of parallelism, test your skills with this practice exercise. Revise each of the three sentences below to eliminate lapses in parallelism.

Exercise sentences:

1. Our priorities include reducing hospital wait times, the addition of specialists in key areas, and the reduction of waste.
2. The new program is both effective well as efficient.
3. This position requires:
   - Professional editing experience
   - Proven ability to work independently and as part of a team
   - Know a range of publishing and word-processing programs

How did you do? The solution key below provides one or more potential corrections for each of the exercise sentences. However, please note that there are a number of ways each sentence could be corrected; therefore the answer key is non-exhaustive in its representation of potential solutions.

Solution key

1. Our priorities include reducing hospital wait times, adding specialists in key areas, and reducing waste.
   Or:
   Our priorities include the reduction of hospital wait times, the addition of specialists in key areas, and the reduction of waste.
2. The new program is not only effective but also efficient.
   Or:
   The new program is both effective and efficient
   Or:
   The new program is effective was well as efficient
3. This position requires
   - Experience in professional editing
   - Ability with independent and team-based work
   - Knowledge of publishing and word processing programs