



School of Liberal Arts

University Writing Center

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Parallelism (Defined, Explained, Illustrated)

Two types of football in America, three different races held at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, four qualities of a leader--it's not uncommon to speak about pairs or groups of things: when we write about these things (sometimes referred to as "items in a series"), we have to follow certain "writing conventions" (meaning ways of producing effective texts) have to be followed for our readers to be able to follow our meaning. One of the conventions is the use of a conjunction between two items (stadium football and arena football) and the use of commas when more than two are named (the Indy 500, the Brickyard 400, and Formula 1). Another convention is parallelism. Just as the parallel bars of a gymnast have to be equidistant from each other, the items in a series have to be equal; that is, all of the items have to be expressed in the same grammatical form. Parallelism helps a reader in two ways: when items are parallel, a reader can process a great deal of information more quickly; and a reader can understand the relationship between the items, and the ideas they express, more easily.

Commonly, writers will have to check items for parallelism in

- lists preceded by a colon
- outlines
- headings and sub-headings
- resumes
- compound expressions.

In the following sentences note the items in a series:

1. In compound expressions, items are connected by coordinating conjunctions (*such as and, but, or, nor*), by paired coordinating conjunctions (*such as not only . . . but also*), and by phrases (like *more than* and *rather than*, that indicate a comparison).
2. When we evaluated the motors, we considered not only their initial cost but also their maintenance cost.

two nouns (modified): initial cost
maintenance cost

3. Before any specific plan is adopted, a number of concerns must be addressed, including equity between employees, benefit options, attitudes of employees, and expense.

four nouns: equity between employees
benefit options
attitudes of employees
expense

4. Medical offices have attempted to decrease the number of patients who fail to keep their appointments by studying the reasons for missing appointments, the types of patients who break appointments, and the strategies used by some doctor's offices to solve the problem.

3 noun phrases: *the reasons for missing appointments*
the types of patients who break appointments
the strategies used by some doctor's offices to solve the problem

5. Businesses can boost employee morale if they keep the organization interesting, welcome new ideas, recognize effort, have responsible leaders, support personal growth, and promote a sense of belonging in the employees.

6 verb or predicate phrases:

keep the organization interesting
welcome new ideas
recognize effort
have responsible leaders
support personal growth
promote a sense of belonging in the employees

6. Various experts in the field of education offered suggestions, such as preparing a manual for substitute teachers, recruiting substitute teachers at community colleges, requiring classroom teachers to meet with substitute teachers, and hiring a full-time substitute teacher.

4 gerunds (-ing form of the verb):

preparing a manual for substitute teachers
recruiting substitute teachers at community colleges
requiring classroom teachers to attend workshops with . . .
hiring a full-time substitute teacher

Note: Sometimes, to clarify the meaning, the parallelism of items is emphasized by repeating an article or preposition with each item, which would otherwise be understood--and not expressed.

For practice, revise the following sentences that have unparallel items in a series.

1. He could not tell when the project would begin, the completion date, or who would work on it.
2. Dr. Reynolds had to decide if the newly discovered object was a star, a planet, or classified as some other type of celestial body.
3. During the seminar, the new workers were taught how to use menus, access Help screens and the use of key commands.