

# 16 Parallel Construction

## 16.1 WHY CHOOSE PARALLELISM?

**Parallel construction**, also called **parallelism**, shows that two or more ideas are equally important by stating them in grammatically parallel form: noun lined up with noun, verb with verb, phrase with phrase. Parallelism can lend clarity, elegance, and symmetry to what you say:

*I came;*

*I saw;*

*I conquered.*

—Julius Caesar

Using three simple verbs to list the things he did, Caesar makes coming, seeing, and conquering all equal in importance. He also implies that for him, conquering was as easy as coming and seeing.

In many ways writing is the act *of saying I,*  
*of imposing* oneself upon  
other people,  
*of saying listen* to me,  
*see* it my way,  
*change* your  
mind.

—Joan Didion

Didion gives equal importance to saying *I*, imposing oneself, and voicing certain commands. Furthermore, she builds one parallel construction into another. Using a series of imperative verbs, she puts equal weight on *listen*, *see*, and *change*. The result is a rhetorically commanding definition of the act of writing.

We look for signs in every strange event; we search for heroes in every unknown face.

—Alice Walker

Walker stresses our searching by making the second half of this sentence exactly parallel with the first.

## 16.2 WRITING PARALLEL CONSTRUCTIONS

To write parallel constructions, put two or more coordinate items into the same grammatical form:

I have nothing to offer but *blood, toil, tears, and sweat*.

—Winston Churchill

Churchill uses four nouns to identify what he offers the British people in wartime.

. . . and that government *of the people, by the people, for the people* shall not perish from the earth.

—Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln uses three prepositional phrases to describe the essential characteristics of American democracy.

On all these shores there are echoes *of past and future: of the flow of time, obliterating yet containing* all that has gone before.

—Rachel Carson

Carson uses two prepositional phrases about time, and then a pair of participles to contrast its effects.

*We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.*

—Benjamin Franklin

Franklin uses two parallel clauses to stress the difference between two equally pressing alternatives.

*A living dog is better than a dead lion.*

—Ecclesiastes

The likeness in form between the two phrases lets us clearly see how much they differ in meaning.

## 16.3 USING CORRELATIVES WITH PARALLELISM

**Correlatives** are words or phrases used in pairs to join words, phrases, or clauses. The principal correlatives are *both . . . and*, *not only . . . but also*, *either . . . or*, *neither . . . nor*, and *whether . . . or*. When using correlatives to highlight a parallel construction, be sure that the word or word group following the first member of the pair is parallel with the word or word group following the second:

Before the Polish strikes of 1980, *both* the Hungarians *and* the Czechs tried in vain to defy Soviet authority.

His speech *not only* outraged his opponents, *but (also)* cost him the support of his own party. (*Also* is optional here.)

Near the end of the story Daniel Webster threatens to wrestle with the devil *either* on Earth *or* in hell.

In the nineteenth century, tuberculosis spared *neither* the wealthy *nor* the poor.



## 16.4 EDITING FAULTY PARALLELISM

When two or more parts of a sentence are parallel in meaning, you should coordinate them fully by making them parallel in form. If you don't, the **faulty parallelism** may jar your reader:

- ▶ The Allies decided to invade Italy and then ~~that they would~~<sup>to</sup> launch a massive assault on the Normandy coast.

Here are further examples:

- ▶ I like swimming, skiing, and ~~to hike~~<sup>hiking</sup> in the mountains.
- ▶ [or] I like ~~swimming, skiing,~~<sup>to swim, ski,</sup> and ~~to~~ hike in the mountains.
- ▶ Either we must make nuclear power safe or ~~stop~~<sup>we must</sup> using it.
- ▶ [or] ~~Either~~<sup>W</sup> we must make nuclear power safe or ~~stop~~<sup>either</sup> using it.

In sentences made with correlatives, each correlative goes just before one of the parallel items.

- ▶ The more I see of ~~men,~~<sup>the more likable</sup> I find dogs, ~~more likable.~~<sup>more likable.</sup>  
—Madame de Staël
- ▶ My idea of heaven is a great big baked potato, ~~and I would like~~  
someone to share it with.  
—Oprah Winfrey
- ▶ They fought ~~in~~<sup>in</sup> the streets, the fields, and in the woods.

In a series of phrases beginning with a word such as *to* or *in*, repeat the word before each phrase or don't repeat it at all after the first one (*in the streets, the fields, and the woods*).



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