

WORD COUNT WRITERS TALK ABOUT WRITING

Ending the Tug of War over Parallelism

November 21, 2014

By [Erin Brenner](#)

Parallelism is something copyeditors obsess about and writers take little notice of. If we could meet in the middle, our sentences would be a lot happier.

Defining Parallelism

Parallelism is no more than matching parts of a sentence or multiple sentences grammatically. It creates balance and rhythm in the sentence and brings order and clarity to meaning.

Let's see how that works:

Jaimie collects guitars, rare books, and plays piano.

Did you trip at the end of the example sentence? After the verb *collects*, we get a series of three items. If we were to break the sentence into three, we'd get:

Jaimie collects guitars.

Jaimie collects rare books.

Jaimie collects plays piano.

Now we can more easily see that *guitars* and *rare books* are nouns acting as direct objects of *collects*, but *plays piano* is a verb phrase. That last item doesn't fit the pattern. The reader has been set up to expect a third noun and is handed a verb instead. The sentence is understandable, but it makes the reader pause.

Parallelism's Dual Role

Because parallelism basically serves two purposes, we can divide it into two types: grammatical parallelism and rhetorical parallelism. This division can help writers and editors meet in the middle.

So far, we've looked at grammatical parallelism. That is, the main point of making the sentence parts grammatically similar is for precision, leading to clearer ideas. Grammatical parallelism is relatively easy to spot and usually as easy to fix. In our first example, we had two nouns and a verb. To fix the sentence, we'll create parallel verbs, in the same tense and with direct objects following them:

Jaimie collects guitars and rare books and plays piano.

Rhetorical parallelism matches sentence parts through grammar, too, but the emphasis is on the rhythm instead. It makes the sentence more enjoyable to read and, thus, more memorable. *Farnsworth's Classical English Rhetoric* offers this as an example of rhetorical parallelism (or *isocolon*):

[Lord Rockingham] remained fixed and determined, in principle, in measure, and in conduct. He practised no managements. He secured no retreat. He sought no apology.

—Edmund Burke, Speech on American Taxation (1774)

Burke's use of parallelism in the first sentence (twice) and between the next three sentences gives weight to his words. They echo in listeners' ears. The pleasing rhythm



keeps listeners' attention and makes it more likely that they will agree with him.

Parallelism also allows the writer to say a thing more concisely. In the above example, Burke uses relatively few words to share the idea that Lord Rockingham has been consistent in his beliefs and actions and how he displayed both. Yet through the repetition of prepositional phrases (*in principle, in measure, in conduct*), he forces listeners to think longer about Rockingham's determination and consistency.

Skipping Parallelism

If parallelism is so good, why would writers sometimes ignore it, trying their copyeditors' sanity? There are several reasons:

- To emphasize the non-parallel item
- To keep a pleasing rhythm
- To avoid aligning ideas that aren't logically parallel
- To avoid confusing the reader
- To avoid a sing-song rhythm
- To avoid introducing too many ideas at once

The Copyeditor's Handbook gives this quote from E. B. White ("Death of a Pig") as an example of the power in not parallelizing everything:

I have written this account in penitence and in grief, as a man who failed to raise his pig, and to explain my deviation from the classic course of so many raised pigs. The grave in the woods is unmarked, but Fred can direct the mourner to it unerringly and with immense good will.

The first sentence uses parallelism (*in penitence* and *in grief*) to set the rhythm and tone of this section of the essay. In the second sentence, the unparalleled *unerringly* and *with immense good will* emphasize the solemnity of visiting the grave. They stick out because they don't match, and emphasizing their meaning as a result.

Pay attention to the parallelism, or the lack of it, in your writing. Would parallelism help clarify your ideas, create a pleasing sound, or emphasize your point? Does the lack of parallelism serve a purpose?

Once you know what the desired effect is, you can more wisely decide whether to use parallelism or not. And save your copyeditor's sanity.

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Erin Brenner is the founder of [Right Touch Editing](#), a customizable editing service. She has been an editing professional for over 15 years and is sought after for her expertise in language mechanics. She works on a variety of media in all levels of editing. In addition, she provides bite-sized lessons to improve your writing on her blog [The Writing Resource](#) and is the editor of [Copyediting.com](#), which offers advice and training for those who edit copy. Follow her on Twitter at [@ebrenner](#) or on [Facebook](#).

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