Parallelism

Parallelism is important in writing because it allows a writer to achieve a sense of rhythm and order. When sentence structures are not parallel, writing sounds awkward and choppy. Parallel clauses are usually combined with the use of a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

Not Parallel: Even though Nancy did not go to the dance, she purchased a new dress, applied make-up, and had photos taken.

In two of the three clauses, the verb (purchased, applied) precedes the noun (dress, make-up), so the third clause should follow the same format. Also, the other verbs are in simple past, while the third one is in past perfect. Parallelism demands verb tense consistency.

Parallel: Even though Nancy did not go to the dance, she purchased a new dress, applied make-up, and took photos.

Writers often violate rules of parallelism because they want a variety of expressions and sentence forms. However, sometimes when a writer compromises parallel structure, they compromise their ability to show that two or more ideas are of the same level of importance.

Not Parallel: Cassandra likes shopping, dancing, and to watch classic movies.

The verb “to watch” is different from the verbs “shopping” and “dancing,” which are acting as gerunds. When a sentence lacks verb consistency, a reader may assume that one idea is more important than other.

Parallel: Cassandra likes shopping, dancing, and watching classic movies.

Parallelism also helps the writer ensure that his entire sentence is in active or passive voice.

Not Parallel: The CEO expected his consultants to present their ideas at the board meeting, to explain their plan of action, and that questions would be asked by other board members.

The final part of the sentence is not parallel to the first because it moves from active voice to passive voice “would be asked.” In order to correct this, the last part of the sentence should be changed to active voice.

Parallel: The CEO expected his consultants to present their ideas at the board meeting, to explain their plan of action, and to answer questions asked by other board members.

Always remember to skim through your paper and look for conjunctions. Check on each side of the conjunction to see if the clauses joined are parallel.