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Aggie Grammar Guide: Parallel Structure

Parallel structure (also called parallelism) is when two or more items (for example, nouns or clauses) are balanced within a sentence or between sentences; that is, they are treated equally grammatically and logically. Parallel structure helps ensure your reader correctly interpret your ideas because if you don't show how 2 or more items clearly connect, your reader could get confused. For example, the first sentence below illustrates a lack of parallelism with one list item, "racial," being an adjective and the rest nouns. The second sentence is revised to be grammatically parallel (all nouns):

- Example: Not only do **racial, gender, class,** and **sexuality** affect a student's academic success, but their sense of belonging also plays a big role.
- Revision: Not only do **race, gender, class,** and **sexuality** affect a student's academic success, but their sense of belonging also plays a big role.

This parallelism signals to the reader that each of these nouns equally affects a student's academic success. Your sentences should be grammatically parallel, as well as logically parallel, meaning your ideas must be logically ordered.

Grammatical Parallel Structure

Parallel structure is required when you write a list of two or more items joined with a coordinating conjunction. Those items can be any part of speech, including phrases or clauses, as long as each item has the same grammatical form and fits grammatically and logically in the sentence. Check the Commas and Semicolons chapter to see how to punctuate lists.

- Example (adjective phrases): Many students are **afraid of the future, worried about family troubles,** or **tired of adults giving up on them.**
- Example (nouns): I know that if I'm not feeling my best about something, there are always people to talk to whether **professors, peer counselors,** or **roommates.**
- Example (gerund phrases): As human beings, we all tend to trust reliable sources for our important decisions, such as **buying a house, going to college,** or **choosing a job.**
- Example (adjectives): This is **ridiculous** and **pathetic.**
- Example (verb phrases): I **sat at a table, took out my homework,** and **placed it on my right side.** Then I **turned to face the board, opened my notebook,** and **started to write notes.**
- Example (adverbs): If an educator has knowledge of dealing with conflicts, then they will know how to solve problems **effectively** and **justly.**

Similarly, in a list with a correlative conjunction (phrases like **either...or, neither...nor,** or **both...and**), parallel structure is required.

- Example ("either...or" with gerund phrases): The idea of either **staying in your hometown** or **leaving it for college** can sometimes seem uncomfortable.

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- Example (“neither...nor” with adjectives): My culture is neither the same as **Salvadorian** nor **Guatemalan**.
- Example (“both...and” with prepositional phrases): Support from rock climbing friends is crucial, both **on the rock** and **in daily life**.

Sometimes you can reduce grammatically parallel forms, especially phrases or clauses. Often the first part of the phrase or clause can modify the elements that follow it. Below is an example with verb phrases. The first sentence shows two full verb phrases and the second shows a reduced form, with the “will be” modifying the second verb.

- Example (unreduced): If this is done at every level such as middle school, high school, and college and to every student, there will be a higher chance that people **will be going to college** and **will be getting a degree**.
- Example (reduced): If this is done at every level such as middle school, high school, and college and to every student, there will be a higher chance that people **will be going to college** and **getting a degree**.

Here is an example with parallel clauses:

- Example (unreduced): **He valued education**, and **he questioned the United States’ education system**.
- Example (reduced): **He valued education** and **questioned the United States’ education system**. (Note: The comma is no longer necessary in the reduced form because the second subject was deleted. See the Commas and Semicolons chapter for more information.)

Logical Parallel Structure

In parallel structure, logic is important to guide your reader through your writing and to ensure cohesion, or connections, between your ideas. In the example below, the items in the list are all the same form (nouns), but are not logically linked; “cross country” and “track and field” are sports but “class” is not.

- Example of a grammatical but illogical parallel sentence: The sports that I enjoyed the most in high school were **cross country**, **track and field**, and **class**.

Here’s how we can revise that sentence to make it more logically parallel and to make each of the nouns logically linked, that is, make them all sports.

- Revision: The sports that I enjoyed the most in high school were **cross country**, **track and field**, and **badminton**.

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Parallel structure is also useful when you need to list things in order of importance, in order of size, or in some other way that's important to convey your message. Here are two more examples of grammatically and logically parallel sentences:

- Example: If a climber falls from the rock, another person needs to **crouch, catch the one falling, and push the climber onto the mat** to assure her/his/their safety. (This structure demonstrates step-by-step instructions.)
- Example: The journal report focuses on analyzing many aspects of the magazine — **background, visual layout and context**—in order to better understand the writing and layout techniques of a professional publication. (This structure tells the reader in what order these topics will occur in the report.)

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Intermediate Practice

None of the sentences below are parallel, either in terms of grammar or logic. Revise each sentence so it is parallel. You may need to change some of the wording to fix logic issues.

Example: Making friends in class can help you create connections in case you need to copy notes or clarification on something you might have missed.

*Answer: Making friends in class can help you create connections in case you need to copy notes or **clarify** something you might have missed. (Explanation: changed “clarification” to its verb form, “clarify,” to make it parallel to the verb “copy.” Both are now verbs.)*

- 1) Some suicide rulings are based on cops, physicians, or the coroners’ methods.
- 2) There is always a dilemma between trying to overcome problems, solving problems, and to stay safe.
- 3) The author’s main pieces of evidence are her feelings, experiences from her childhood, and implies the effect these experiences had on her.
- 4) Languages are related closely to read, write, speaking and listen in our daily life.
- 5) This means that once I have been issued a French visa, I can easily go to other Schengen Agreement member countries, including German, Italy, Spanish, etc. – to travel and visit.
- 6) The majority of professors teaching other languages such as Spanish, French, German or Chinese are not native speakers themselves, they have forgotten, or lost their accent over the years due to the lack of practice.
- 7) For instance, my basketball coach in middle school studied abroad in Africa for two years and taught young ladies about health, such as sexually transmitted diseases and basketball.
- 8) Finally the author introduces how we, normal people, can save coral reefs, including using fewer sunscreens and find substitutions which are less harmful.
- 9) If the government can help them by teaching them some skills and give some assistance in finding a job, their conditions might be better.
- 10) The author used many different examples to illustrate his points, such as the use of water, keep using the same clothing for a long period of time, no shower but a soaked wet cloth for showers, etc.

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Advanced Practice

For this activity, you will read the following paragraph and underline each instance of parallel structure.

Example: If this is done at every level such as middle school, high school, and college and to every student, there will be a higher chance that people will be going to college and getting a degree.

Underlined: If this is done at every level such as middle school, high school, and college and to every student, there will be a higher chance that people will be going to college and getting a degree.

In 2015, U.S. News announced that Princeton is ranked number one on the list of the best national universities. On the other hand, the Princeton Review revealed that Bryant University is the best college in the United States. The cause of this difference is that they have different processes on how to rank colleges. While U.S. News relies on experts and categories, the Princeton Review relies on student surveys about colleges. U.S. News has seven categories for ranking with unequal statistical weight for each of them; it then divides colleges into different categories. Colleges within a category will rank each other. The Princeton Review's ranking system is a little simpler. It surveys a large amount of students by asking them more than eighty questions about themselves, their schools, other students, and life at their school. The questions offer an answer choice on a five-point scale from excellent to awful. Both of them are credible sources, but the question is whether we should trust U.S. News or the Princeton Review. From my perspective, I would trust the Princeton Review's college ranking system. Letting colleges rank each other would lead to a biased result because colleges do not know anything about each other and compete against each other. Surveying students is more reasonable since they have been at that college and experienced the college life there.

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Answer Key

Intermediate Practice

The following revisions show possible ways to correct parallel structure errors. The parallel structure is in bold in each sentence. Other options may exist. The part of speech or logical connection is included in parentheses after each sentence.

- 1) Some suicide rulings are based on **cops', physicians', or coroners'** methods. (all plural possessive nouns, so all items are logically and grammatically connected)
- 2) There is always a dilemma between trying **to overcome** problems, **to solve** problems, and **to stay** safe. (all infinitive phrases)
- 3) The author's main pieces of evidence are **her feelings, experiences from her childhood,** and **the effect** these experiences had on her. (all noun phrases)
- 4) Languages are related closely to **reading, writing, speaking** and **listening** in our daily life. (all gerunds)
- 5) This means that once I have been issued a French visa, I can easily go to other Schengen Agreement member countries, including **Germany, Italy, Spain,** etc. – to travel and visit. (all nouns)
- 6) Option 1: The majority of professors teaching other languages such as Spanish, French, German or Chinese **are** not native speakers themselves, **have forgotten** the language, or **have lost** their accent over the years due to the lack of practice. (all verb phrases. Even though the tenses are inconsistent ["are" is simple present and "have forgotten" and "have lost" are present perfect], the meaning is logical and the list is grammatical because all are verb phrases.)
Option 2: The majority of professors teaching other languages such as Spanish, French, German or Chinese **are** not native speakers themselves, **they forget** the language, or **they lose** their accent over the years due to the lack of practice. (all independent clauses that contain verb phrases in the simple present tense.)
- 7) For instance, my basketball coach in middle school studied abroad in Africa for two years and taught young ladies about health, such as **sexually transmitted diseases** and **birth control**. ("basketball" and "health" are not logically connected, so you can either change "health" to be more broadly inclusive [e.g. "issues" or "topics"] or change "basketball" to be a noun related to health.)
- 8) Finally the author introduces how we, normal people, can save coral reefs, **including** using fewer sunscreens and **finding** substitutions which are less harmful. (all gerunds)
- 9) If the government can help them by **teaching** them some skills and **giving** some assistance in finding a job, their conditions might be better. (all gerunds)
Option 1: The author used many different examples to illustrate his points, such as **the use of water, the use of** the same clothing for a long period of time, **the use of** a soaked wet cloth for showers, etc. (all noun phrases; deleted repetition of "shower")
Option 2: The author used many different examples to illustrate his points, such as using **water, the same clothing for a long period of time, a soaked wet cloth for showers,** etc. (all nouns, with the first one a gerund phrase and the following two reduced forms; deleted

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repetition of “shower.” An alternative interpretation is that all list items after the gerund are noun phrases.)

Advanced Practice

Here is the paragraph with all instances of parallel structure underlined.

In 2015, U.S. News announced that Princeton is ranked number one on the list of the best national universities. On the other hand, the Princeton Review revealed that Bryant University is the best college in the United States. The cause of this difference is that they have different processes on how to rank colleges. While U.S. News relies on experts and categories, the Princeton Review relies on student surveys about colleges. U.S. News has seven categories for ranking with unequal statistical weight for each of them; it then divides colleges into different categories. Colleges within a category will rank each other. The Princeton Review's ranking system is a little simpler. It surveys a large amount of students by asking them more than eighty questions about themselves, their schools, other students, and life at their school. The questions offer an answer choice on a five-point scale from excellent to awful. Both of them are credible sources, but the question is whether we should trust U.S. News or the Princeton Review. From my perspective, I would trust the Princeton Review's college ranking system. Letting colleges rank each other would lead to a biased result because colleges do not know anything about each other and compete against each other. Surveying students is more reasonable since they have been at that college and experienced the college life there.