Parallelism

If two or more ideas are parallel or closely related, such as pairs, items in a list, or opposites, they should be parallel in grammatical form also. Single words should be balanced with single words, phrases with phrases, clauses with clauses. Ex.: “This novel is not to be tossed lightly aside, but to be hurled with great force.” – Dorothy Parker

Hint to the writer:
A grammar check on the computer will not catch when a sentence does not have correct parallelism.

Balance parallel ideas in a series. For example, the following sentence is not parallel: “Symptoms to look for are rebelliousness, withdrawal, and they are depressed.” To fix it, change “…and they are depressed” to “depression,” because it will then be a noun like the rest of the words in the series. “Depression” is a symptom, like rebelliousness and withdrawal; “they are depressed” is a statement that describes a person’s condition.

Balance parallel ideas presented as pairs. Common parallel pairs include 1) ideas connected with coordinating conjunctions, such as and, but, or or; 2) parallel ideas connected with a pair of correlative conjunctions such as either…or or not only…but also; or 3) parallel ideas connected with a word introducing a comparison, usually than or as.

Three examples:

Ex. of parallelism with coordinating conjunctions: “At Lincoln High School, vandalism can result in suspension or even being expelled from school.” “Being expelled” is the wrong choice here. The writer only needs the word “expulsion,” because this balances with the other noun, “suspension.”

Ex. of parallelism with correlative conjunctions: “I was advised either to change my flight or take the train.” The words that follow “either” should be balanced with the words that follow “or.” Since the writer used “to change my flight” after “either,” he/she should write “to take the train” after “or” to balance both ends of the sentence. You could also fix the sentence by rewriting it “…to either change my flight or take a train.”

Ex. of comparisons linked with “than” or “as”: “It is easier to draw than writing when using crayons.” Since “to draw” is used before “than,” the same type of verb should be used to say “writing,” so it should read, “It is easier to draw than to write” instead.
Repeat function words to clarify parallels. Function words like “by, to, that, because,” signal the grammatical nature of word groups that follow them. Sometimes they can be omitted, but sometimes they are needed to show the reader parallel structures.

Notice how the addition of the italicized “to” in this sentence makes it easier to read than had it been omitted. “Many health-conscious people have switched to buying produce at the farmers’ market or to shopping at stores with an organic section.”

Do not mix forms. Listing activities using the -ing (gerund) form should not be mixed with words using the to (infinitive) form.

Gerund: William likes baking, whistling, and talking on the phone. (parallel) The mixed (unparallel) way of writing this sentence might be: William likes baking, whistling, and to talk on the phone.

Infinitive: Charlotte likes to cook, to ride her bicycle, and to work on her quilt. (parallel) This can also be written: Charlotte likes to cook, ride her bicycle, and work on her quilt. (parallel) The mixed (unparallel) way of writing this sentence might be: Charlotte likes to cook, ride bikes, and working on her quilt.

Sometimes the best way to fix an unparallel structure is to rephrase some of the words.

Mixed (not parallel): The teacher said that he was a poor student because he waited until the last minute to study for the exam, completed his lab problems in a careless manner, and his motivation was low. To fix this, rephrase the list: The teacher said that he was a poor student because he waited until the last minute to study for the exam, completed his lab problems in a careless manner, and lacked motivation. Now each word in the list has a past-tense ending (ed), creating parallelism.

Parallel structure is really a matter of balance. Balancing a sentence can be compared to balancing a scale if one pretends that certain words— and, or, but, or, nor (conjunctions)—are the balancing points and if we understand that the words being balanced must carry the same “weight” in the sentence. One part of speech or of a sentence can be balanced only by one (or a series) of the same kind.

Unbalanced: I don’t like driving at night, but to walk is okay.

Parallel: I don’t like driving at night, but walking at night is okay.

To make the mixed sentences parallel, balance the weight on either side of the conjunction by using the same form of speech for both ideas.

References: Some ideas or examples were taken from St. Cloud State Literary Online (http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/grammar/parallelism.html), Purdue University Writing Center website (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_parallel.html), and Diana Hacker’s Rules for Writers, (5th ed.).