



# In the Service of *Good Writing*

## Parallel Structure: The Right Way to List, Compare, and Contrast

By Laurie Thomas, MA, ELS  
Madison, NJ

- *Parallel structure is easier to illustrate than to explain.*
- *In matters of principle, stand like a rock; in matters of taste, swim with the current.*

—Thomas Jefferson

- *Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read.*

—Groucho Marx

The sentences above are examples of good parallel structure because the sentence elements (ie, words, phrases, and clauses) that are of equal rank (ie, that are coordinate) are expressed in the same grammatical form. Consider the following example:

- ☹ He likes bicycling, canoeing, and to go on hikes.
- ☺ He likes bicycling, canoeing, and hiking.

Why use 2 gerunds and an infinitive phrase when you could use 3 gerunds? In this article, I'll give you some simple tricks for spotting which items in a sentence should be parallel and direct you to some resources for further study.

Proper use of parallel structure makes it easier to say exactly what you mean and easier for the reader to figure out what you meant. It also makes your writing more pleasant to read. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the *AMA Manual of Style* instructs medical communicators to pay attention to parallel structure.<sup>1</sup>

### Spotting parallelisms

You need to think about parallel structure whenever you see any of the following:

- Sentence elements that are joined with a coordinating conjunction
- Items that are being listed, either within a sentence or in bulleted lists or tables
- Items linked by correlative conjunctions

- Comparisons
- Verbs of being

### Coordinating conjunctions

The main coordinating conjunctions used in English are *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, and *for*. They are called coordinating conjunctions because the elements they join are of equal grammatical rank. Thus, these elements ought to be in the same grammatical form. Here's an example from the *AMA Manual of Style*:

- ☹ Surgery, radiation therapy, and to give chemotherapy are possible therapeutic approaches.
- ☺ Surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy are possible therapeutic approaches.

### Lists

Sometimes, the coordinating conjunction is implied, such as in a bulleted list or among the elements in a table. In a list, the elements should all be in the same grammatical form: all phrases or all sentences; all statements or all commands. The order of the items should also be logical. The items could be organized alphabetically, by importance, by time sequence, or in some other order.

If you can't make the items in a bulleted list or table parallel, ask yourself whether they really constitute a list. It might make sense to separate them into 2 or more lists or to rewrite the section as a paragraph.

### Correlative conjunctions

Correlative conjunctions are pairs of conjunctions that work together. Either... or and neither... nor are common examples. Be especially alert for the placement of prepositions in constructions involving these correlative conjunctions, as in this example from the *AMA Manual of Style*:

- ☹ Poor drug efficacy may be caused by either lack of absorption or by increased clearance.
- ☺ Poor drug efficacy may be caused by either lack of absorption or increased clearance.

Note that *either* always goes with *or* and *neither* always goes with *nor*. You can use these correlative conjunctions to link more than 2 elements:

- ☹ Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.

### Comparisons

Comparisons often involve the conjunction *than*, the construction *as... as*, or a verb of being. These sentences can be marred by faulty parallel structure and/or faulty comparison. **Faulty parallel structure** means that the items that are being compared are not in the same grammatical form. **Faulty comparison** means that the items being compared are not what the writer really meant to compare.

Here's a good example of a faulty comparison that involves a verb of being. Notice how the use of a demonstrative pronoun improves the sentence:

- ⊖ The results of this study are similar to the Nurses' Health Study.
- ⊖ The results of this study are similar to **the results** of the Nurses' Health Study.
- ⊕ The results of this study are similar to **those of** the Nurses' Health Study.

Faulty comparisons often result from an elliptical construction, which means that words have been left out of the sentence. If you find an ambiguous sentence like this while editing, query the author. Don't guess.

**Ambiguous:** He is closer to his father than his mother.

**Clear:** He is closer to his father than to his mother.

**Clear:** He is closer to his father than his mother is.

Be particularly alert for the word *than*. You might want to search your document electronically for all instances of *than*. Look at the elements that are being compared by *than*. Watch out for faulty parallel structure and faulty comparisons. Also consider moving the items that are being compared as close as possible to the word *than*:

- ⊖ Treatment with A was associated with more pronounced antidepressant effects during the first weeks of treatment than B, which suggests a more rapid onset of action.
- ⊕ During the first weeks of treatment, antidepressant effects were more pronounced in the group treated with A than in the group treated with B; this finding suggests that A has an earlier onset of action than B has.

To find other comparisons, search for the character string *compar*, which will turn up all instances of the words *compare*, *compared*, and *comparison*. Note that *compared with* phrases are adjectival; thus, they will try to modify whatever noun they directly follow. Sometimes it is better to say *than in* as opposed to *compared with*.

- ⊖ Heartworm infection is more common in dogs compared with cats.
- ⊕ Heartworm infection is more common in dogs than in cats.

### Verbs of being

A verb of being is like an equal sign. Think about what the sentence is equating, and whether you can put the elements on either side of the verb of being in the same grammatical form.

☺ What you see is what you get.

### How to build your skills

Once you review the parts of speech and some basic rules of English syntax, it gets easier to recognize and correct faulty parallelisms and faulty comparisons. Besides learning the underlying principles, editors must learn the grammar terminology, which will enable them to explain to authors why any given editorial change needs to be made. One invaluable yet free resource is Capital Community College's Guide to Grammar and Writing, especially the page on parallel form: <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/parallelism.htm>.

**Author contact:** *Lthomas521@verizon.net*.

### References

1. American Medical Association. *AMA Manual of Style*. 10th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. (Parallel construction is discussed on pages 325-327.)



## Medical translations All European languages

We translate all documents that play a role during research, registration, marketing and use of medicines and medical devices, including:

- Clinical trial documents, such as ICF, SP, PRO
- Product launch documents
- Adverse Effect reports
- All EU drug registration documents, such as SmPC, PIL, Packaging

**MediLingua BV**  
[www.medilingua.com](http://www.medilingua.com)