Parallel Structure

Framing a sentence, like framing a house, has to be done on a well-coordinated plan. In writing, coordination refers to the conjoining of closely related parts in the structure of a sentence. The seven coordinating conjunctions—and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so—are used to conjoin either two or more independent clauses or smaller grammatical units within a clause (whether it’s an independent clause or a subordinate clause). For example:

He had taken the old man’s fiddle because he needed money, but he hadn’t thought much about where he would sell it or who would buy it.

The “but” in this sentence conjoins two independent clauses (the first one, before the comma, has a subordinate clause attached to it: “because he needed the money”). The subject of this sentence (“He”) has acted without thinking, so the two independent clauses are closely related, and the conjunction “but” helps to clarify that relation—both by indicating a contrast and by pairing these two grammatically similar elements of the sentence.

The sentence plan calls for this parallel structure, and it calls for a pairing of two other elements as well: the things that “He . . . hadn’t thought much about”—namely “where he would sell it” and “who would buy it.” The “or” in this sentence conjoins these two closely related noun clauses, both governed by the preposition “about.”

This example illustrates an important rule of good sentence construction: If two or more ideas or items in your sentence are matched up because they’re closely related, express them in parallel grammatical form. Strunk and White put this rule more succinctly: “Express coordinate ideas in similar form.” The sentence about taking “the old man’s fiddle” applies this rule twice. Hence it conveys quite a bit of information in a clear, concise, well-organized way.

Here are three more well-coordinated sentences (from Nora Bacon’s The Well-Crafted Sentence):

Each wave washed in from somewhere unseen and washed out again to somewhere unknown.

The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished.

Geraldine, a dedicated, headstrong woman who six years back had borne a baby, dumped its father, and earned a degree in education, sometimes drove Shamengwa to fiddling contests.
The first sentence is perfectly balanced between waves washing in and waves washing out. The second sentence sharply conveys the complex status of the “document”—completed in one way but not in another—by means of its parallel structure. In the middle of the third sentence we find three of Geraldine’s most impressive achievements from six years ago, all expressed in verb phrases (“borne . . . dumped . . . earned . . .”). In each case a single coordinating conjunction makes it possible to balance and coordinate the related ideas.

The last of these three examples involves a series of things—that is, three or more things, listed together. A series almost always calls for grammatically similar elements. The parallel structure of a series makes it visible to your reader by identifying the elements that are being conjoined. The parallel elements in the series don’t have to be identical, but they should be expressed in the same grammatical form—adjective, adverb, verb phrase, prepositional phrase, independent clause, or whatever. Nora Bacon takes the following instance of faulty parallelism and corrects it; then she lists a third version—what the author (Henry Louis Gates, Jr.) actually wrote:

Not parallel: I was used to being the only black person on the beach, in a restaurant, or who would be staying at a motel.

Parallel: I was used to being the only black person on the beach, in a restaurant, or at a motel.

Parallel: I was used to being the only black person on the beach, or in a restaurant, or at a motel.

Note how Bacon’s correction of the faulty sentence is more concise than Gates’s original version, which uses the coordinating conjunction “or” twice instead of once for rhetorical effect, perhaps intending to emphasize that everywhere he turned, Gates found himself racially alone. This difference between the two correct versions demonstrates that there’s more than one way to put coordinate ideas in parallel form. Compare the two corrected versions that Bacon supplies here:

Not parallel: Gates’s essay tells about his high school commencement speech, then describing his college experiences, then integrating a nightclub, and finally what happened when he dated a white girl.

Parallel: Gates’s essay describes his high school commencement speech, his college experience, his adventure integrating a nightclub, and the consternation he caused by dating a white girl.

Parallel: Gates’s essay describes his experiences delivering a high school commencement speech, finding his academic interests in college, integrating a nightclub, and dating a white girl.
Here again the series slips off the rails in the faulty version, and we have two corrected versions to choose from. The second corrected version appears to be a further revision of the first corrected version, because the “-ing” action words make it a more explicit, more balanced series. Both corrected versions are grammatically correct in their parallel structure, but the second one will probably be more effective (depending on the context in which it appears).

So the act of coordinating the elements of your sentence will sometimes encourage you to change the elements of your sentence in a fruitful way. Here’s another example of how correcting a series for parallel structure compels the writer to clarify the meaning of the sentence:

Not parallel: He argued for financial aid for the children of immigrants in order to ensure the equal right to study the liberal arts, an equal chance at higher-paying jobs, and to learn the communication skills that prepare young adults for full participation in democracy.
(The error in parallelism is evident here: “to ensure” is parallel with “to learn,” and “the equal right” is parallel with “an equal chance,” but the three parts of the series don’t all match up in the same way.)

Parallel: He argued for financial aid for the children of immigrants in order to ensure the equal right to study the liberal arts, an equal chance at higher-paying jobs, and equal access to the communication skills that prepare young adults for full participation in democracy.
(This reads well. The last part of the sentence has been corrected to complete the series in the manner of the first two members of the series: “equal right . . . equal chance . . . equal access.”)

Parallel: He argued for financial aid for the children of immigrants in order to ensure an equal chance to study the liberal arts, to learn the communication skills that prepare young adults for full participation in a democracy, and to pursue higher-paying jobs.
(The series in this revised version is now governed by “equal chance” with no mention of “equal right,” and all three parts of the series start with an infinitive: “to study . . . to learn . . . to pursue.”)

This second version slightly changes the logic of the sentence, because the original version of the sentence puts “communication skills” after “higher-paying jobs” rather than before it, suggesting that such “jobs” help to impart these “skills.” The first corrected version retains this emphasis on language acquisition through employment, but the second version doesn’t. It puts the learning of “communication skills” before the pursuit of “higher-paying jobs” (and right after “to study the liberal arts”), as if learning to communicate effectively makes it possible to pursue those jobs.
**IN SUM:** Working out the logic and structure of a series is important in writing a clear sentence that says what you mean. How you slot together the parts of a sentence makes all the difference.

*Special Cases of Parallel Structure* (with examples from Bacon & Hacker):

1) **Correlative conjunctions** come in pairs. The pairs *both/and, either/or*, and *neither/nor* distribute emphasis more or less equally between two parallel parts of a sentence. The correlative pairs *not/but* and *not only/but also* (sometimes given as *not only/but*) tends to put added emphasis on the second part, after *but* or *but also*. For example:

Ultimately, **both** his mother **and** his father lost interest in the neighborhood dispute.

The purpose of dialogue is **not** to help participants reach agreement **but** to help them achieve mutual understanding.

The violin brings **not only** great heartache **but also** great joy.

Look for the **parallel structure** in each of these sentences, and notice that the correlative conjunctions demarcate exactly where the parallelism begins. It begins with these elements, respectively: “his mother . . . his father . . .”; “to help . . . to help . . .”; “great heartache . . . great joy.” Using correlative conjunctions requires that you make parallel the parts of the sentence that are being correlated.

2) **Direct comparison** also involves parallel structure, especially when the word introducing the comparison is *than* or *as*:

- **Parallel:** It is easier to speak in abstractions **than** to ground one’s thoughts in reality.
- **Not parallel:** It is easier to speak in abstractions than grounding one’s thoughts in reality.)

- **Parallel:** Crossing the desert proved just **as** difficult **as** crossing the mountains.
- **Not parallel:** To cross the desert proved just as difficult as crossing the mountains.