

Parallelism

What is faulty parallelism?

Each of the following constructions leads to a parallel of something with something else:

a and b
a, b, and c
a or b
a, b, or c
not only a but also b

The clauses or phrases joined by the conjunctions should have similar grammatical structures to avoid awkwardness and ensure that your reader can follow the logic of your sentence. When they don't, that's called faulty parallelism.

What does faulty parallelism look like?

Look at each of the following sentences; even if you can't initially pick out what's wrong, they probably feel "off" to you somehow. The problem in each is faulty parallelism.

I like cats, to run, and sushi. (It almost seems as though the cats are running, doesn't it?)

The car was purring softly, red, and expensive. (Purring softly seems out of place here, right?)

He was not only British but also running. (Odd combination, and the construction makes it weirder.)

Do you want to watch a movie or pizza? (Unless you fill in "to eat" mentally, you're staring at pepperoni!)

When something seems strange in your writing but you can't put your finger on it, faulty parallelism might be the culprit. Can you misread something in a way that's unintentionally funny? A faulty parallel might be to blame.

How do I identify and fix faulty parallelism?

Here's one easy way to do it. To check whether the elements of a construction are in parallel, place boxes around them. Next, label the boxes.

My first-year philosophy professor was informative^a, lively^b, and a source of inspiration^c.

Notice that the first two phrases in the *a, b, and c* construction are adjectives, while the third is a noun phrase. This sentence suffers from faulty parallelism. To repair the faulty parallelism here, you will have to change the elements *a* and *b* into noun phrases or the element *c* into an adjective. Always choose the simplest option. In this case it is easiest to change the final element, *c*, into an adjective:

My first-year philosophy professor was informative^a, lively^b, and inspiring^c.

Often faulty parallelism can be repaired by paying close attention to where you place your verbs. The faulty parallelism in the following sentence is easy to detect once you place boxes around the two elements of

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the *not only but also* construction:

My philosophy professor not only demonstrated how to reason persuasively^a but also how to avoid logical fallacies^b.

Note that element *a* begins with a verb but element *b* doesn't. To repair the faulty parallelism, you can add a verb to the start of element *b*. However, since the same verb will work for both parts of the construction, the more elegant solution is to drag the verb *demonstrated* to the front of the whole construction:

My philosophy professor demonstrated not only how to reason persuasively^a but also how to avoid logical fallacies^b.

Problems with parallelism often arise from the careless use of clauses beginning with the subordinating conjunction *that*:

He warned me to revise my essay^a and that I should pay close attention to parallel structures^b.

To repair the problem, choose either an infinitive (*to* + verb) or a *that* clause on both sides of the *a* and *b* construction. In this example, the infinitive provides the more elegant solution:

He warned me to revise my essay^a and to pay close attention to parallel structures^b.

(adapted from Jerry Plotnick, University College Writing Centre of the University of Toronto— www.writing.utoronto.ca/)