

Parallel Structure: An Unparalleled Letdown



Lester Kaufman and Tom Stern from *The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation* explain how sentences can be grammatically correct but still be ugly when writers mess up parallel structure.

By Lester Kaufman and Tom Stern, read by Mignon Fogarty, [Grammar Girl](#)

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 Blue book of
grammar and
punctuation

Bad grammar weakens good writing, but some bad writing is grammatically flawless. Today we'll discuss **parallel structure** and show how **faulty parallelism** can ruin a sentence without breaking any rules of grammar.

Self-editing is part of writing. We could write *I wrote the letter. I signed the letter. I sent the letter.* But we discover at an early age that we don't need three sentences. Instead, we compress the information into one sentence: *I wrote, signed, and sent the letter.*

That's where parallelism comes in. When two or more elements (*wrote, signed, sent*) are given equal consideration in the context of a sentence, they

should be as similar as possible: *wrote, signed, and sent* are all active verbs in the past tense, giving the sentence parallel structure. That is what makes *I wrote, signed, and sent the letter* simple, direct, and clear.

Now consider this rickety sentence:

**Faulty parallelism
can ruin a
sentence without
breaking any rules
of grammar.**

She lost her agent, publisher, and her books weren't selling.

That's like saying *She lost A, B, and C*; what happened to *C*? This is verbal bait-and-switch. The reader expects another noun after *agent* and *publisher*, and feels cheated when the third element is a clause instead. Why not rewrite the sentence with two independent clauses: *She lost her agent and publisher, and her books weren't selling.*

A different kind of faulty parallelism:

On my vacation, I want to sit back, relax, and to have fun.

To keep things parallel, either remove the second *to* and say *I want to sit back, relax, and have fun*, or put *to* in front of all the verbs: *I want to sit back, to relax, and to have fun.*

Here's a mistake you see all the time:

DeWayne is as smart or smarter than Hank.

Did you catch it? As it stands, the sentence states *DeWayne is as smart than Hank, or smarter*. Make it *DeWayne is as smart **as** or smarter than Hank*.

We close with this monstrosity:

The five-bedroom estate home features distinct architectural finishes, wraparound terraces with eastern- and western-facing views, and is near downtown Lafayette.

The writer has us anticipating a third noun to go with *finishes* and *terraces*. So how about something like *and an ideal location just minutes from downtown Lafayette*. When we read instead the feeble *and is near downtown Lafayette*, we almost feel betrayed.

Thanks again to Lester and Tom, who recently released a new edition of *The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation*. What sets this great book apart is the 40 pages of quizzes. You can find all their material at grammarbook.com.

Pop Quiz

See if you can fix these sentences' faulty parallelism.

1. I have earned two degrees, entered the health care field, and have lost forty pounds.
2. I wasn't informed or interested in the offer.
3. Juanita is proud of her painting and how well she writes.

Go to Page 2 for the answers.

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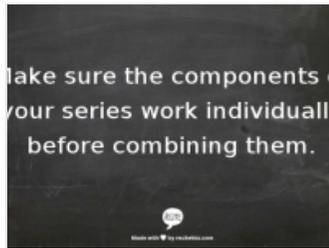


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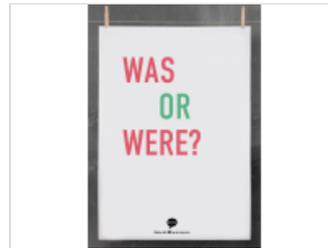
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