

Balancing parallel ideas

Balance parallel ideas in a series.

Readers expect items in a series to appear in parallel grammatical form. When one or more of the items violate readers' expectations, a sentence will be needlessly awkward.

- ▶ Abused children commonly exhibit one or more of the following symptoms: withdrawal, rebelliousness, restlessness, ^{depression.} and ~~they are depressed.~~
^

The revision presents all of the items as nouns.

- ▶ Hooked on romance novels, I learned that there is nothing more important than being rich, looking good, and ^{having} ~~to have~~ a good time.
^

The revision uses *-ing* forms for all items in the series.

- ▶ After assuring us that he was sober, Sam drove down the middle of the road, ran one red light, and ^{went through} two stop signs.
^

The revision adds a verb to make the three items parallel: *drove . . . , ran . . . , went through. . .*

NOTE: In headings and lists, aim for as much parallelism as the content allows.

Balance parallel ideas presented as pairs.

When pairing ideas, underscore their connection by expressing them in similar grammatical form. Paired ideas are usually connected in one of the following ways:

- with a coordinating conjunction such as *and*, *but*, or *or*
- with a pair of correlative conjunctions such as *either . . . or* or *not only . . . but also*
- with a word introducing a comparison, usually *than* or *as*

Parallel ideas linked with coordinating conjunctions

Coordinating conjunctions (*and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *so*, and *yet*) link ideas of equal importance. When those ideas are closely parallel in content, they should be expressed in parallel grammatical form.

- ▶ At Lincoln High School, vandalism can result in suspension or even ^{expulsion} ~~being expelled~~ from school.
^

The revision balances the nouns *suspension* and *expulsion*.

- ▶ Many states are reducing property taxes for home owners and ^{extending} ~~extend~~ financial aid in the form of tax credits to renters.
^

The revision balances the verb *reducing* with the verb *extending*.

(continued)

Parallel ideas linked with correlative conjunctions

Correlative conjunctions come in pairs: *either . . . or*, *neither . . . nor*, *not only . . . but also*, *both . . . and*, *whether . . . or*. Make sure that the grammatical structure following the second half of the pair is the same as that following the first half.

- ▶ Thomas Edison was not only a prolific inventor but also ~~was~~ a successful entrepreneur.

The words *a prolific inventor* follow *not only*, so *a successful entrepreneur* should follow *but also*. Repeating *was* creates an unbalanced effect.

- ▶ The harried clerk advised me either to change my flight or ^{to} take the train. ^

To change my flight, which follows *either*, should be balanced with *to take the train*, which follows *or*.

Comparisons linked with *than* or *as*

In comparisons with *than* or *as*, the elements being compared should be expressed in parallel grammatical structure.

- ▶ It is easier to speak in abstractions than ^{to ground} ~~grounding~~ one's thoughts in reality. ^

To speak in abstractions is balanced with *to ground one's thoughts in reality*.

Repeat function words to clarify parallels.

Function words such as prepositions (*by*, *to*) and subordinating conjunctions (*that*, *because*) signal the grammatical nature of the word groups to follow. Although they can sometimes be omitted, include them whenever they signal parallel structures that might otherwise be missed by readers.

- ▶ Many smokers try switching to a brand they find distasteful ^{to} or a low tar and nicotine cigarette. ^

In the original sentence, the prepositional phrase was too complex for easy reading. The repetition of the preposition *to* prevents readers from losing their way.

NOTE: If it is possible to streamline the sentence, repetition of the function word may not be necessary.

- ▶ The board reported that its investments had done well in the first quarter but ~~that they~~ had since dropped in value.

Instead of linking two subordinate clauses beginning with *that*, the revision streamlines the sentence by balancing the two parts of a compound predicate — *had done well in the first quarter* and *had since dropped in value*.