

# Parallelism: a mini-lesson

Also called:

Parallel structure

Parallel syntax

# What is Parallel Structure?

- Parallel structure involves putting together elements of similar structure to achieve balanced writing.
- Winston Churchill did not say:  
“I have nothing to offer but bleeding, toil, tears, and sweating.”
- He said:  
“I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.”
- Churchill understood parallelism.

# Use parallelism in **your own writing**

- Good parallel structure improves the clarity of your writing.
- To make your writing parallel, use the same grammatical form for all items in a list.

**Poor:** Betty has intelligence, honesty, and she is funny.

**Improved:** Betty has intelligence, honesty, and **humour**.

**Poor:** Good writing requires you to plan outlines, write several drafts, and revision.

**Improved:** Good writing requires you to plan outlines, write several drafts, and **revise your work**

- **WRONG:** A good attitude, being on time, and speaking effectively are her attributes.



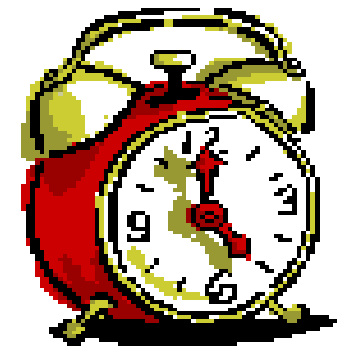
- **RIGHT:** Having a good attitude, being on time, and speaking effectively are her attributes.



- **WRONG:** This proposal is profitable, timely, and it helps us.



- **RIGHT:** This proposal is profitable, timely, and helpful.



# LET'S PRACTICE!!!

- Many gases are invisible, odorless, and they have no taste.
- Many gases are invisible, odorless, and tasteless.
- Mr. Foster is not only an excellent barber but also sings well.
- Mr. Foster is not only an excellent barber but also a good singer.

# Be able to Identify Parallelism used by Professional Writers

- Sentences or parts of a sentence are parallel when structures within them take the same form.
- Parallelism is important at the level of
  - the word
  - the phrase
  - the clause



# Parallelism at **Word** level

- “Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?” (– Henry David Thoreau)
- In this sentence, the words hurry and waste, both nouns, follow the preposition with; hurry and waste are **parallel**.

# Parallelism at **Word** level

(another example)

- “In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime.” (-- Henry David Thoreau)
- In this sentence, the words true and sublime, both adjectives, modify the pronoun something; true and sublime are **parallel**.

## Parallelism at **Phrase** level

- “Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man.” (Henry David Thoreau)
- To modify the adjective remote in this sentence, Thoreau uses parallel prepositional phrases: in the outskirts, before the farthest star, before Adam, and after the last man.

## Parallelism at **Phrase** level (another example)

- “This is more difficult, because there is no zeitgeist to read, no template to follow, no mask to wear.” (Anna Quindlen)
- Here, the writer uses three parallel nouns each preceded by no and each followed by an infinitive.

## Parallelism at **Phrase** level (another example)

- “[I]t has truly been said that never in history have so many educated people devoted so much attention to so few children.” (Jane Howard)
- Here, the writer uses three parallel noun phrases, each beginning with so.

# Lack of Parallelism

- “[I]t has truly been said that never in history have so many educated people devoted so much attention to so few children.” (Jane Howard)
- Here’s what Howard’s sentence might look like if it lacked parallelism:
- It has truly been said that never in history have a lot of people who are well educated devoted their attention to such a small number of children.
- This version of the sentence is harder to read and easier to forget.

## Parallelism at **Clause** level

- “If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.”  
(Henry David Thoreau)
- Here, the writer begins with a dependent clause (If . . . dying) followed by an independent, or main, clause (let . . . extremities); then after the semicolon, Thoreau presents another dependent-independent construction, parallel to the first.

## Parallelism at **Clause** level (another example)

- “[W]e perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence, that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality.” (Henry David Thoreau)
- This example contains two parallel dependent clauses, each beginning with *that* and functioning as an object of the verb *perceive*.



# Purpose or Effect of Parallelism

- Writers use parallelism as a rhetorical and stylistic device:
  - to emphasize ideas,
  - to contrast ideas,
  - to connect ideas.

Note: You will see many questions about parallelism on the multiple choice section of the AP Exam. Remember that you are looking for repeating structure (at some level).