



Uni-edit English Writing Tip: Parallel Structures Part A – What are they?

Level of difficulty: Intermediate

Parallel Structures Part A – What are they?

This is a five part series about using parallel structures.

While editing English manuscripts, Uni-edit editors often need to correct sentences for correct usage of parallel structures. Correct use of parallel structures makes the writing easier to read and easier to understand for native-speakers of English and for non-native speakers of English.

The word 'parallel' means in the same direction. Two roads are parallel if they run in the same direction. In language, a parallel structure means the words are assembled using the same form. In language, using parallel structures is critical for clear writing. To write using parallel structures means that expressions of similar content and function should be outwardly similar.

The similarity of form enables the reader to recognize more readily the similarity of content and function. All items, phrases, or clauses used in a sentence should be parallel.

Incorrect: The new regulations could cause problems for both the winners and for those who lose.
English corrected: The new regulations could cause problems for both winners and losers.

Explanation: In the incorrect sentence, the items after 'both' are 'the winners' and 'those who lose'; but, these phrases have different structures. This confuses the reader. In the correct sentence, 'winners' and 'losers' have the same structure. This is much easier to read.

Here is another example:

Incorrect: Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method, while now the laboratory method is employed.

English corrected: Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method; now it is taught by the laboratory method.

Explanation: The incorrect sentence gives the impression that the writer is undecided or timid; he seems unable or afraid to choose one form of expression and hold to it. The correct sentence shows that the writer made a choice on how to structure the sentence. The repeated structure is

'the...method'. Although repetitive, the parallel structure makes the sentence easier to understand.

Here is another example:

Incorrect: The doctor recommended a daily intake of 5 mg of antibiotic, changing the diet plan, and exercising.

English corrected: The doctor recommended a daily intake of 5 mg of antibiotic, a change in diet, and regular exercise.

And here is another example:

Incorrect: The eruption was slow, continued sporadically, and ended in a catastrophe.

English corrected: The eruption began slowly, continued sporadically, and ended catastrophically.

Explanation: The incorrect sentence seems disjointed as different structures are used. In the correct sentence, the consistent and repetitive use of adverbs (that is, slowly, sporadically, catastrophically) makes it much easier to understand. This also aids the flow of the sentence.

Here is another example:

Incorrect: My professor has wit, charm, and she has an extremely pleasant personality.

English corrected: My professor has wit, charm, and a pleasing personality.

How are parallel structures useful?

Parallel structure is especially useful for making detailed descriptions and comparisons more readable. For example, if the different minerals in a rock are always described with their features (such as modal abundance, grain size, and habit) in the same order, then parallel structures can be used to describe the features of each rock without repeating the same names for each feature. This allows readers to assimilate the information more easily. It may be helpful to construct successive paragraphs in parallel, especially when discussing results in a research paper.

END OF TIP