Eschew Obfuscation: Parallel Structure by Faye Roberts

I owe it all to Mrs. Skorupski. She was my tenth-grade English teacher for only six weeks, leaving when her husband was transferred. Before she departed, though, she instilled in our class an appreciation for parallel structure.

Parallel structure—or parallelism—is a way to show that two or more words or ideas are equally important. It adds clarity, rhythm, and flow to language, and it has been around a long time.

Here are some familiar examples:

Julius Caesar: *Veni, vidi, vici. (I came, I saw, I conquered.)*

Charles Dickens: *It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness . . . .*

Abraham Lincoln: *Government of the people, by the people, for the people.*

In the Lincoln example, the prepositional phrases are parallel. The example from Dickens is part of a much longer passage that continues with additional parallel clauses. The quotation from Julius Caesar also uses clauses with the lagniappe of extra parallelism in the Latin alliteration.

Bryan Garner writes in *The Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation* that "every element of a parallel series must be a functional match (word, phrase, clause, sentence) and serve the same grammatical function in the sentence (e.g. noun, verb, adjective, adverb). This syntactic linking of matching elements is called coordination. But when linked items do not match, the syntax of the uncoordinated sentence breaks down."

Perhaps we're hardwired to appreciate the coordinated quality of parallel structure, as in these familiar adages:

Win some, lose some.

Easy come, easy go.

What goes around, comes around.

Early to bed, early to rise.

To be clear, I was not an easy convert to parallelism. As a high school sophomore, I couldn't see the problem. Parallel structure seemed artificial to me. But Mrs. Skorupski was unrelenting and made me a believer. I think she'd be pleased to know that now I

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find its absence to be nerve-jarring, as in this example:

My greatest fears are heights and of getting sick.

In this sentence there are two fears: *heights* (a noun) and *of getting sick (*a prepositional phrase). When ideas are in pairs or lists, they should be in the same form—i.e., parallel. One way to make these ideas parallel is to say:

My greatest fears are heights and sickness.

Parallel structure is important whenever words or phrases are used in a series. This is true whether the series is composed of words or of phrases—or even of clauses. (Do you see what I did there with "of" to maintain parallelism?)

Here are some more examples of sentence structures that, though familiar, are faulty because their components aren't parallel.

FAULTY: *The last chapter of the book is thrilling and a surprise*. The word *thrilling* is a gerund but *surprise* is a noun.

BETTER: *The last chapter of the book is thrilling and surprising*. Both *thrilling* and *surprising* are gerunds.

FAULTY: *I like to write but not rewriting*. Here, *to write* is the infinitive form of the verb, but rewriting is a gerund.

BETTER: *I like to write but not to rewrite.* Both *to write* and *to rewrite* are infinitives. This construction was a particular sticking point for me as a young writer. That second "to" just didn't seem necessary. Now I delight in the balance it adds to the sentence.

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Eschew Obfuscation, continued

Here's a tip to help you avoid unwanted humor due to lack of parallelism: Be sure to include all the words necessary to keep a construction parallel. Omitting some words can cause your writing to communicate something other than what you intended, for instance:

Of everyone in the aerobics class, Angie's kicks were higher than the other students.

Unless Angie's foot is going higher than the heads of her classmates, it would be more accurate to say:

Of all those in the aerobics class, Angie's kicks were higher than those of the other students.

Many times problems with parallelism occur following a coordinating conjunction such as "or" or "and" as illustrated in this real-life example modified from a book I recently copyedited:

FAULTY: *The first steps in developing a business plan involve figuring out what you have and the needs of your customers.* The meaning of this sentence is clear but it doesn't flow smoothly.

BETTER: *The first steps in developing a business plan involve figuring out what you have and what your customers need.* The addition of the second *what* makes it clear that there are two equally important things to figure out.

The lack of parallel structure can be more difficult to spot in longer phrases:

FAULTY: *In traditional mysteries, detectives often have these characteristics: intelligence, a specialized skill, a strong sense of justice, and **they don't like to play by the rules***. That last phrase—***they don't like to play by the rules***—is not parallel with the others. The first three terms are nouns: *intelligence, skill, sense of justice*.

BETTER: *In traditional mysteries, detectives often have these characteristics: intelligence, a specialized skill, a strong sense of justice, and a resistance to playing by the rules.* The final phrase retains the original concept but has been recast to make it parallel with the others.

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Resources

Want to learn more about parallel structure? Check these websites.

Benner, Margaret L. "Self Teaching Unit: Parallel Structure" https://webapps.towson.edu/ows/moduleparallel.htm

"Parallel Structure," Purdue's Online Writing Lab https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/623/01/

Some of these examples are basic—the kind of errors that Mrs. Skorupski abhorred. In the world of professional writing, though, examples of faulty parallelism can be much harder to spot. In its entry on "faulty parallelism," *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* suggests that "if the writer doesn't notice it and the editor doesn't notice it and the reader doesn't notice it, how serious can it be?" This may be a reasonable approach but I'm pretty sure Mrs. Skorupski would notice.

Wondering if we've done an article about a specific writing topic? There very well may be one. For past issues of *First Draft*, see https://sincguppies.wildapricot.org/First-Draft (you must be logged into Wild Apricot). For an index of past articles, go to https://groups.yahoo.com/neo and log in with your Yahoo Groups ID and password. Click on "Guppies-SinC" in the left-hand side-bar and then on "Files" in the white navigation bar under the "Search Conversations" box. Click on the "Index of *First Draft* Articles" folder and select the newest index.

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