

Grammar: Parallel structure

To make the ideas in your **sentences** clear and understandable, you need to make your sentence structures grammatically balanced (i.e. parallel). This means that ideas in a sentence or paragraph that are similar should be expressed in parallel grammatical form (e.g. Jessie likes **running**, **swimming** and **painting** NOT Jessie likes **running**, **swimming** and **to paint**). Parallel grammatical form is needed for:

1. Lists of words, phrases and clauses
2. Parallel ideas presented as pairs
3. Essay headings and tables of content



GRAMMAR CHECKERS do not flag faulty parallelism. Computers cannot assess whether ideas are parallel in meaning, so they will not catch faulty parallelism. Check the rules for parallel structure and check your sentences as you write and when you proofread your work.

1. Lists of words, phrases and clauses

When ideas are presented in a series or a list, the same parts of speech should be used to ensure parallel structure. This applies whether the list consists of single words, phrases or clauses—single words should be balanced with single words, phrases with phrases and clauses with clauses.

Examples:

● **Rule 1: Single words** should be matched with single words of the same type (e.g. all nouns, all adverbs, all adjectives).

- ✗ The lecturer asked the students to speak in tutorials clearly, in a loud voice and not to be rude.
(ADVERB) (ADVERBIAL PHRASE) (INFINITIVE)
- ✓ The lecturer asked the students to speak in tutorials clearly, loudly and politely.
(ALL WORDS IN THE LIST ARE NOW ADVERBS)

● **Rule 2: Groups of words (phrases)** should be matched with word groups of the same pattern (e.g. noun phrases beginning with verb +-ing, prepositional phrases).

- ✗ Success at university depends on attending classes, reviewing your notes and to keep up with your readings.
(NOUN PHRASE -ING) (NOUN PHRASE -ING), (INFINITIVE VERB =TO + VERB)
- ✓ Success at university depends on attending classes, reviewing your notes and keeping up with your readings. (ALL WORDS IN THE LIST ARE NOW NOUN PHRASES BEGINNING WITH -ING WORDS)

● **Rule 3: Clauses** should be matched with clauses of the same pattern (e.g. noun clauses, adverbial clauses, adjectival clauses).

- ✗ The lecturer expected that the students would present the seminar, be using PowerPoint presentations and they would answer questions from the audience.
(TWO PHRASES followed by a SENTENCE)
- ✓ The lecturer expected that the students would present the seminar, use a PowerPoint presentation and answer questions from the audience.
(ALL THE ELEMENTS OF THE LIST ARE NOW PHRASES BEGINNING WITH A VERB)

2. Parallel ideas connected by conjunctions

Ideas that are joined with **conjunctions** need to be parallel in structure. By using similar grammatical forms to express equal ideas, your writing will be smooth and your writing style will improve.

Examples:

Type 1. Like ideas joined by 'and', 'but', 'or', 'nor', 'for', 'so', 'yet'

- ✓ Your oral presentation should use PowerPoint slides **and** refer to handouts.
- ✓ She failed the essay **but** passed the final exam.
- ✓ Her oral presentation was good, **yet** her essay was poor.

Type 2. Comparisons joined by 'than' or 'as'

- ✓ Learning at university is more difficult **than** studying at high school.
- ✓ Writing assignments is **as** important **as** sitting for exams.

Type 3. Ideas joined by pairs of conjunctions 'both...and', 'either...or', 'neither...nor', 'not only...but also', 'whether...or'

- ✓ **Both** the lecturers **and** the students protested about the changes in assessment policy.
- ✓ The students were **not only** hard-working **but also** community-minded.
- ✓ The assignment tasks need to be **either** submitted electronically **or** posted to the university assessment centre.

3. Essay headings and tables of contents

Assignment headings and tables of contents are easier to read if the headings at the same level have the same grammatical form.

First level headings should use the same structure as other first level headings.

Second level headings should use the same structure as other second level headings.

Third level headings should use the same structure as other third level headings, and so on.

Example:

| Table of Contents | |
|---|---|
| Second level heading – italics 12 pt | I. Introduction to Academic Skills (NOUN PHRASE) |
| | A. <i>Analysing the question</i> (-ING NOUN PHRASE) |
| | B. <i>Researching the topic</i> (-ING NOUN PHRASE) |
| | II. Essay Structure (NOUN PHRASE) |
| | A. <i>Writing paragraphs</i> (-ING NOUN PHRASE) |
| | 1. Topic sentences (NOUN) |
| | 2. Body (NOUN) |
| | 3. Conclusion (NOUN) |
| | B. <i>Reviewing</i> (-ING NOUN PHRASE) |
| | 1. Drafts (NOUN) |
| | 2. Finished product (NOUN) |

First level heading
– bold 12 pt

Third level heading
– normal 11 pt