

# Grammar Tip of the Week #8



## Mangling Sentences

It's very easy to lose control of a sentence. Sometimes, writers attempt to create long, flowing sentences and wind up mangling ideas in awkward sentence structures. One of the biggest problems writers often have is with **parallel structure**.

*Not parallel:* I love teaching, to talk about my subject matter, and do research.

*Parallel:* I love teaching, talking about my subject matter, and doing research.

*Not parallel:* What we say and the things that we teach must be consistent.

*Parallel:* What we say and what we teach must be consistent.

*Not parallel:* My students spoke with each other, with the principal, and me.

*Parallel:* My students spoke with each other, with the principal, and with me.

*Not parallel:* My responsibilities as a teacher are to instruct, to inspire, and support.

*Parallel:* My responsibilities as a teacher are to instruct, to inspire, and to support.

Parallel structure requires that grammatical forms be consistent within sentences: Balance each word with a word, each phrase with a phrase, each clause with a clause, and each sentence with a sentence. It may be necessary to repeat prepositions, articles, or other words to ensure parallel structure.

## Dangling Modifiers

A dangling modifier is a word, phrase, or clause within a sentence that does not logically fit. Often, writers lose control of a sentence when they attempt to link one idea with another. Dangling modifiers occur when words or clauses do not clearly refer to other words in sentences. Rearranging and adding words usually corrects dangling modifiers.

*Dangling:* Running quickly to class, the bell rang.  
(This sentence suggests that the bell ran quickly to class.)

*Correct:* While we were running quickly to class, the bell rang.

*Dangling:* Taking our seats, class started.  
(This sentence suggests that the class took our seats.)

*Correct:* After we took our seats, class started.

*Correct:* Class started after we took our seats.

## Avoiding Sentence Mangling Altogether

The best way to avoid problems with parallel structure and dangling modifiers is to write shorter, less complex sentences. This often runs counter to what we've been taught in school. (Teachers have frequently suggested that long, flowing sentences are the mark of a *skilled* writer.) However, much of the writing done by the typical professional simply reports information. Clearly communicating ideas is just as much a valuable skill as is creatively expressing thoughts. And, sentences that are unnecessarily verbose can confuse readers who are simply skimming for details. Complex, florid pieces of prose are often best left in the hands of *creative* writers.

# Welcome to the Purdue OWL



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## **Summary:**

This handout describes and provides examples of parallel structure (similar patterns of words).

## **Parallel Structure**

Parallel structure means using the same pattern of words to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance. This can happen at the word, phrase, or clause level. The usual way to join parallel structures is with the use of coordinating conjunctions such as "and" or "or."

### **Words and Phrases**

**With the -ing form (gerund) of words:**

**Parallel:** Mary likes hiking, swimming, and bicycling.

**With infinitive phrases:**

**Parallel:** Mary likes to hike, to swim, and to ride a bicycle.

OR

Mary likes to hike, swim, and ride a bicycle.

(Note: You can use "to" before all the verbs in a sentence or only before the first one.)

**Do not mix forms.**

### **Example 1**

**Not Parallel:**

Mary likes hiking, swimming, and to ride a bicycle.

**Parallel:**

Mary likes hiking, swimming, and riding a bicycle.

### **Example 2**

**Not Parallel:**

The production manager was asked to write his report quickly, accurately, and in a detailed manner.

**Parallel:**

The production manager was asked to write his report quickly, accurately, and thoroughly.

**Example 3****Not Parallel:**

The teacher said that he was a poor student because he waited until the last minute to study for the exam, completed his lab problems in a careless manner, and his motivation was low.

**Parallel:**

The teacher said that he was a poor student because he waited until the last minute to study for the exam, completed his lab problems in a careless manner, and lacked motivation.

**Clauses**

A parallel structure that begins with clauses must keep on with clauses. Changing to another pattern or changing the voice of the verb (from active to passive or vice versa) will break the parallelism.

**Example 1****Not Parallel:**

The coach told the players that they should get a lot of sleep, that they should not eat too much, and to do some warm-up exercises before the game.

**Parallel:**

The coach told the players that they should get a lot of sleep, that they should not eat too much, and that they should do some warm-up exercises before the game.

— or —

**Parallel:**

The coach told the players that they should get a lot of sleep, not eat too much, and do some warm-up exercises before the game.

**Example 2****Not Parallel:**

The salesman expected that he would present his product at the meeting, that there would be time for him to show his slide presentation, and that questions would be asked by prospective buyers. (passive)

**Parallel:**

The salesman expected that he would present his product at the meeting, that there would be