

UNCG



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WRITING CENTER  
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## PARALLELISM

### THE PRINCIPLE

Using parallel structures (matching parts of speech) in a pair or series of related words, phrases, or clauses helps to make sentences clear, coherent, concise, and emphatic.

The sentence you just read contains three examples of parallel or matching elements:

*pair or series* -- a pair of nouns

*words, phrases, or clauses* -- a series of nouns

*clear, coherent, concise, and emphatic* -- a series of adjectives

### THE PROBLEM

Notice how awkward the opening sentence would sound if we disrupted those parallel structures. In this version, the underlined phrases are NOT parallel:

Using parallel (grammatically matching) structures in a pair or when there's a series of related words, phrases, or in writing clauses helps to make sentences clear, they are easier to follow, concise, and better emphasis.

Abraham Lincoln's parallel phrase, "a government *of the people, by the people, for the people,*" would not have been nearly so memorable if he had said "a government *of the people, one that the people run, and it is for them*"!

Here are some sentences that sound awkward because they should have parallel constructions, but they don't. The mismatched elements are underlined so they are easier to see.

"It's all Adam's fault," Eve exclaimed. "He was talking, sleeping and picked flowers while I was busy at the tree."

Adam wanted Eve not only to obey while he was around but also when he was away.

It was easier to believe Adam was at fault than seeing him hide behind a fig leaf.

## THE SOLUTION

Find the pairs or series of elements in your sentences, and decide on the best way to make them match. Here are our sample sentences with the corrected parallel constructions in bold type:

- Not parallel: "It's all Adam's fault," Eve exclaimed. "He was talking, sleeping and picked flowers while I was busy at the tree."  
Parallel: "It's all Adam's fault," Eve exclaimed. "He was **talking, sleeping, and picking** flowers while I was busy at the tree."
- Not parallel: Adam wanted Eve not only to obey while he was around but also when he was away.  
Parallel: Adam wanted Eve not only **to obey** while he was around but also **to obey** when he was away.  
Also parallel: Adam wanted Eve to obey not only **when he was around** but also **when he was away**.
- Not parallel: It was easier to believe Adam was at fault than seeing him hide behind a fig leaf.  
Parallel: It was easier **to believe** Adam was at fault than **to see** him hide behind a fig leaf.  
Also parallel: **Believing** Adam was at fault was easier than **seeing** him hide behind a fig leaf.

## NOW SOME FINE PRINT

Tips for spotting parallel constructions:

1. Anytime you have a list or a pair of words joined by AND, look for similar endings (such as **-ing**) or other similarities of form (such as **to + verb**).  

Adam was busy **naming** the animals, **tending** the garden, AND **finding** a fig leaf.  
Eve wanted **to taste** the apple AND **to gain** knowledge.
2. Some sentences have conjunctions (or occasionally adverbs) that we commonly pair together, such as *either . . . or*, *neither . . . nor*, *not only . . . but also*, *rather . . . than*. See if the constructions immediately following those words are parallel, as they are in these sentences:  

*Either* **you can eat** from the tree *or* **you can stay** in the garden.  
Eve *not only* **chatted** with the serpent, *but also* **listened** intently.  
She decided she would *rather* **eat** the apple *than* **hurt** the serpent's feelings.