

Parallel Constructions

Introduction

Expressions containing similar content should be expressed in grammatically parallel constructions. Look at the following pairs carefully. The second sentence of each pair exhibits parallelism and therefore sound better.

I find surfing more pleasurable than to ski.
I find **surfing** more pleasurable than **skiing**.

In the second sentence of this pair the form of the verb has been kept the same.

We employ people to write programs and interviewing clients is also necessary.
We employ people to **write** programs and **interview** clients.

Again, in the second sentence of this pair the form of the verb has been kept the same.

The spectators arrived by car, taxi, and by bus.
The spectators arrived **by car, by taxi, and by bus**.

In the second sentence of this pair, the preposition **by** has been placed before all the means of transportation. This sentence flows better than the first one, which inexplicably treats **taxi** differently from the other means of transportation.

Trouble spots

Possessive forms sometimes cause problems.

Consider the following pairs.

This company's profit is marginally higher than IBM.
This company's profit is marginally higher than IBM's.

People might think that there is parallelism in the first sentence: that is, that **profit** and **IBM** are parallel forms. However, if you think about the meaning that the writer is trying to convey, you will see the possessive form, **IBM's**, is required. The writer is implying that **This company's profit is marginally higher than IBM's profit.**

That essay is longer than my friend.
That essay is longer than my friend's.

Again, people might think that there is parallelism in the first sentence: that is, between **that essay** and **my friend**. However, if you think about what the writer is trying to say, you will see that the possessive form **friend's** is needed. The writer is implying that **That essay is longer than my friend's essay.**

Lists

Whenever a list is given, the structures used should have parallel forms.

Consider these two lists showing the capabilities of a certain robot.

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1. walk down stairs | 1. walk down stairs |
| 2. walk up stairs | 2. walk up stairs |
| 3. jump | 3. jumping |
| 4. run | 4. running |
| 5. sit | 5. sitting |
| 6. set a table | 6. set a table |

The first list uses the same form of the verb at each line and thus uses parallel constructions. The second list mixes different forms of verbs and disrupts the flow of the list.

Impact

Many writers understand that parallel structures help strengthen the impact of their work.

Here are some example sentences.

"We think according to nature; we speak according to rules; we act according to custom."

- Sir Francis Bacon

"... government of the people, by the people, and for the people ..."

- Abraham Lincoln

" Few are those that see with their own eyes and feel with their own hearts."

- Albert Einstein

"Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed."

- Martin Luther King

Parallel Constructions Quiz

For each of the following four sentences, choose the best completion.

That client's presentation was better than ...

- Mary.
- Marys.
- Mary's was.
- Mary's.

The panel found that examining the applicants' designs was more helpful than ... their references.

- to read
- reading
- having read
- they could read

The new staff member needs to be competent at gathering information, analysing data, and ...

- displaying data.
- to display it.
- to display data.
- display data.

The program is designed to

1. calculate averages
2. interpret data
and
3. ...

- displaying data
- also be able to display data
- display data
- data is displayed

Answers

That client's presentation was better than ...

- Mary. **X**
- Marys. **X**
- Mary's was. **X**
- Mary's. **✓**

✓ Correct. The sentence really means "That client's presentation was better than Mary's presentation". However, it would be redundant to repeat the word "presentation".

X No. Think about what the sentence really means.

The panel found that examining the applicants' designs was more helpful than ... their references.

- to read ✗
- reading ✓
- having read ✗
- they could read ✗

✓ Yes. The word "reading" has the same form as "examining".

✗ No. Consider the form of the verb "examining".

The new staff member needs to be competent at gathering information, analysing data, and ...

- displaying data. ✓
- to display it. ✗
- to display data. ✗
- display data. ✗

✓ Yes. The phrase "displaying data" has the same form as "gathering information" and "analysing data".

✗ No. Look at the forms of the preceding verb phrases.

The program is designed to

1. calculate averages
 2. interpret data
- and
3. ...

- displaying data ✗
- also be able to display data ✗
- display data ✓
- data is displayed ✗

✓ Yes. The phrase "display data" has the same form as "calculate averages" and "interpret data".

✗ No. Look at the phrases "calculate averages" and "interpret data".