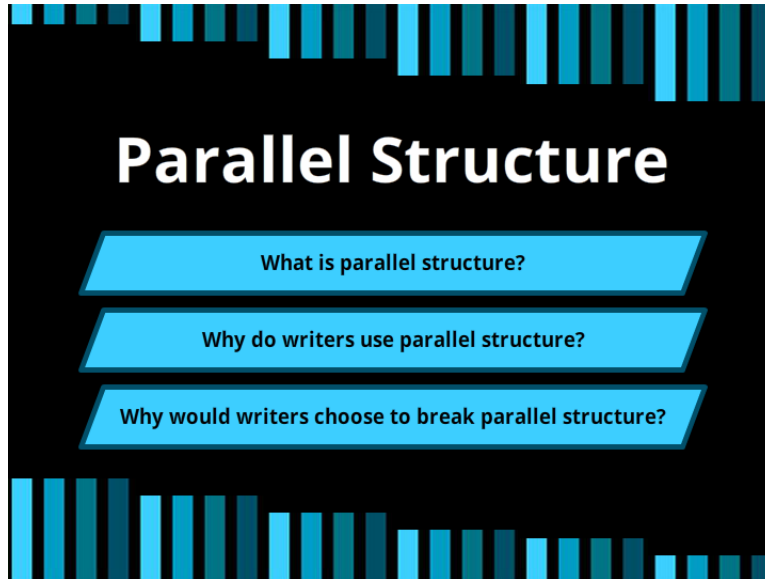# Module 9: Nonfiction
Topic 6 Content: Parallel Structure

Introduction

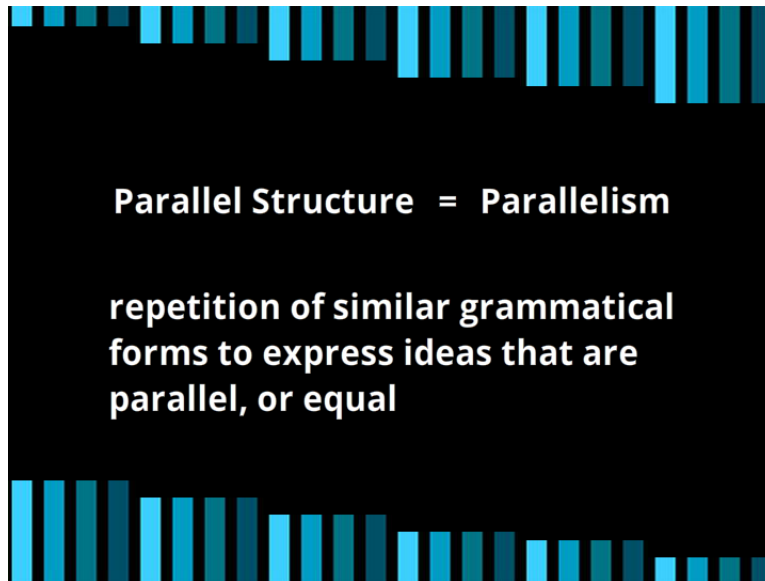What is parallel structure? Why do writers use parallel structure, and why would writers choose to break parallel structure? Click each of the tabs to learn more about parallel structure.

What Is Parallel Structure? (Part 1)

Parallel structure, also known as parallelism, involves the repetition of similar grammatical forms to express ideas that are parallel, or equal.
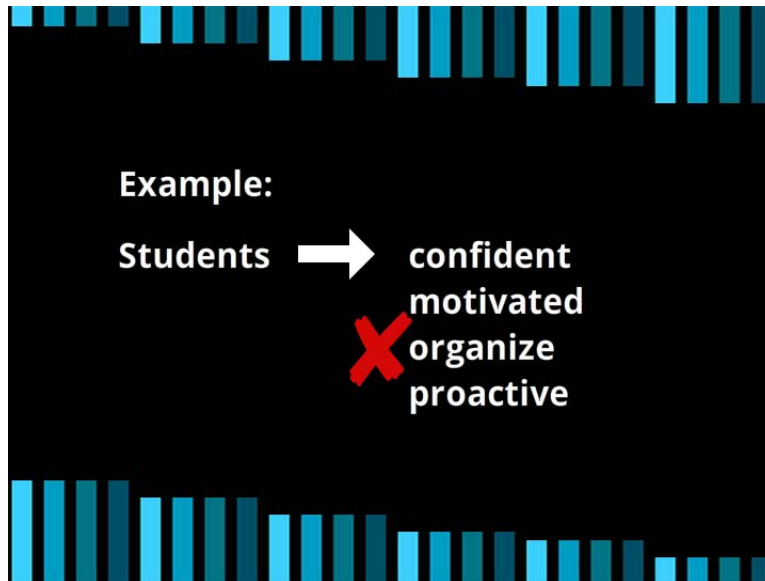
To demonstrate the concept of parallel structure, observe this example that lacks parallelism. Can you identify the error?

> **Students who succeed in school tend to be confident, highly motivated, organize their notes, and proactive in seeking help.**

What Is Parallel Structure? (Part 2)

> **Students who succeed in school tend to be confident, highly motivated, organize their notes, and proactive in seeking help.**

If you pare down the sentence to its essential words, it becomes easier to see the lack of parallel structure in this sentence.
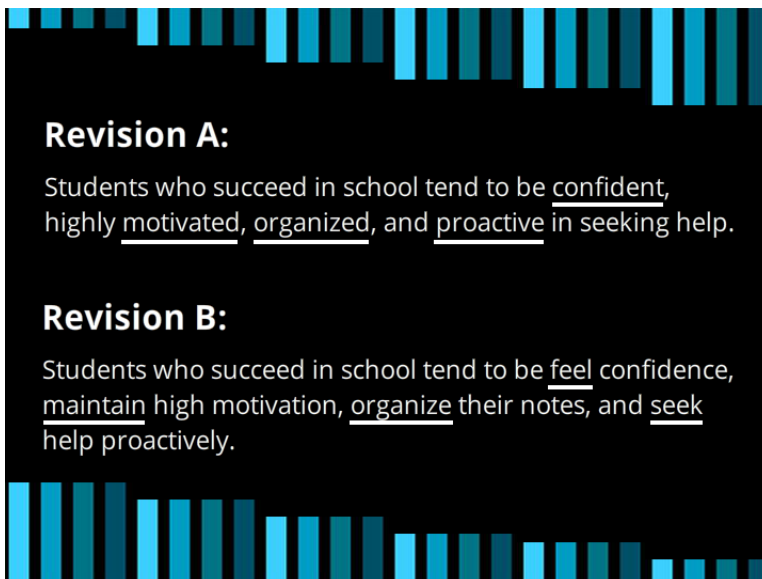
> **Students tend to be <u>confident</u>, <u>motivated</u>, <u>organize</u>, and <u>proactive</u>.**

This example lacks parallel structure because the reader is expecting a list of adjectives that describe successful students. In the middle of this list of adjectives, which includes *confident*, *motivated*, and *proactive*, the writer has inserted an activity: organizing notes.

What Is Parallel Structure? (Part 3)

Students who succeed in school tend to be <u>confident</u>, highly <u>motivated</u>, <u>organize</u> their notes, and <u>proactive</u> in seeking help.

To create parallel structure, the writer should make sure that all of the items in the list have the same grammatical structure. Since the other items are adjectives, the writer can rewrite the verb *organize* as an adjective, as in:

Revision A

Students who succeed in school tend to be <u>confident</u>, highly <u>motivated</u>, <mark><u>organized</u></mark>, and <u>proactive</u> in seeking help.

The writer can also rewrite the sentence so that all items in the list are verbs, as in:

Revision B

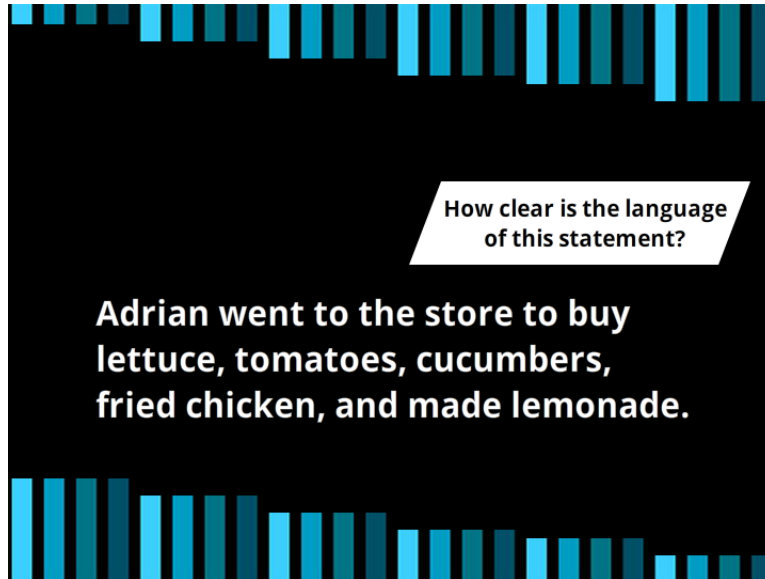**Students who succeed in school tend to <mark><u>feel</u></mark> confidence, <mark><u>maintain</u></mark> high motivation, <u>organize</u> their notes, and <mark><u>seek</u></mark> help proactively.**

Even though one has a list of adjectives and the other has a list of verbs, both of these revised sentences have parallelism because they maintain consistent grammatical structures.

Why Do Writers Use Parallel Structure (Part 1)

Strong writers take advantage of parallel structure primarily to ensure logical flow and easy comprehension for their readers. It is human nature to pay attention to patterns, so people readily pick up on rhythmic and logical patterns when they read text. When writers unexpectedly change the pattern of grammar, it can feel jarring to readers. Or worse yet, readers may not understand the message being communicated. For example, how clear is the language of this statement?

> **Adrian went to the store to buy lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, fried chicken, and made lemonade.**

Why Do Writers Use Parallel Structure (Part 2)
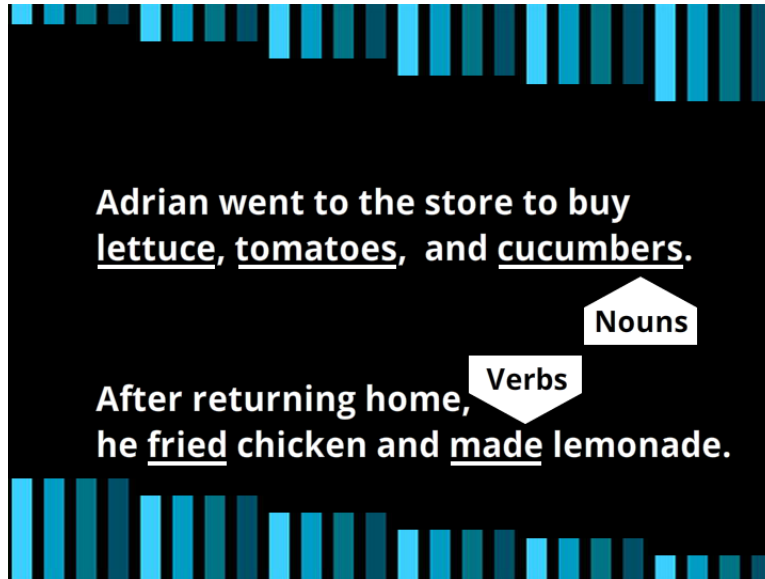
> **Adrian went to the store to buy lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, fried chicken, and made lemonade.**

Because the sentence begins listing a series of food items, the reader expects only nouns as part of this list. Lettuce, tomatoes, and cucumbers are foods that Adrian can buy in a store, and he can also buy fried chicken in a store. However, he cannot buy *made lemonade* in a store; this phrase appears to be an activity, not an item for sale.

Coming across the phrase *made lemonade* is not only jarring and unexpected, it also confuses the reader. Did Adrian buy lemonade in the store, or did he make it at home? Did the writer mean to say *premade* or *ready-made lemonade* instead? For that matter, did Adrian buy fried chicken, or did he fry chicken at home when he made the lemonade?

The sentence as it stands is ambiguous. By correcting for parallelism, communication becomes clear and effective.

> **Adrian went to the store to buy lettuce, tomatoes, and cucumbers. After returning home, he fried chicken and made lemonade.**

The first statement includes a parallel list of nouns, and the second statement includes a parallel list of verbs.

Why Do Writers Use Parallel Structure (Part 3)

Writers also employ parallelism to create dramatic effect or to demonstrate humor and wit. For example, early American president Thomas Jefferson once said:

In matters of style, swim with the current; in matters of principle, stand like a rock.

In this quotation, Jefferson delivers two pieces of advice: go with the flow when it comes to situations that are superficial or transient, but stay firm and resolute regarding your deepest beliefs. Part of what makes his statement so memorable and riveting is that he uses the first piece of advice to set up the second one, an effect made possible with the use of parallelism. The repeated language structure looks something like this.

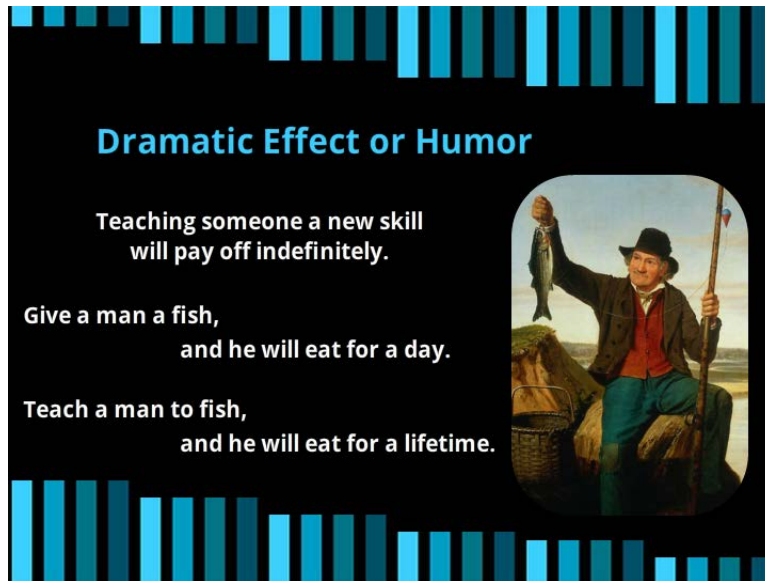**In matters of _____, (do this).**
In matters of _____, (do that).

Because Jefferson repeats the style of his sentence structure, the reader can easily perceive the pattern and anticipate the ending, almost like waiting for the punch line of a joke. The parallelism in this statement also adds a touch of elegance and sophistication, highlighting a compelling thought with musical eloquence.

Why Do Writers Use Parallel Structure (Part 4)

By the same token, you can express the importance of learning and self-reliance by saying something like:

> **Teaching someone a new skill will pay off indefinitely.**

However, the same message becomes so much more eloquent and memorable with parallel structure. Compare the emotive effect that parallel structure brings to this idea.
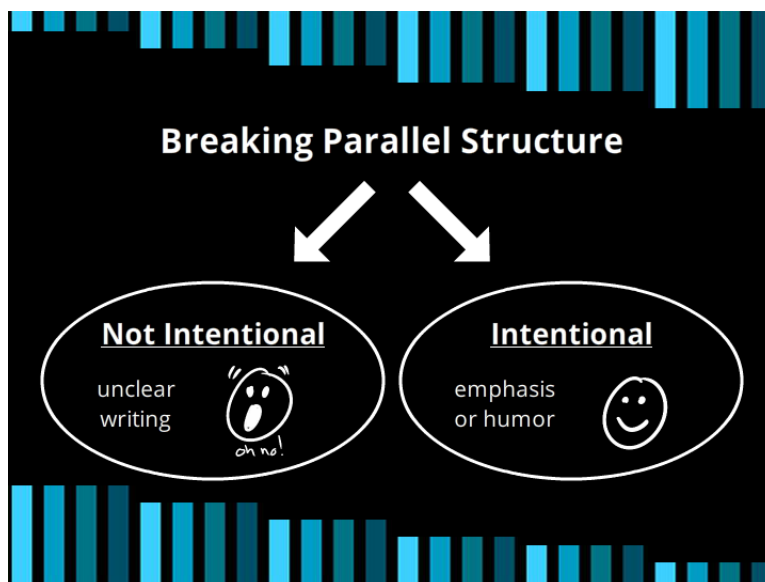
> **Give a man a fish, and he will eat for a day.**
> **Teach a man to fish, and he will eat for a lifetime.**

Why Would Writers Choose to Break Parallel Structure? (Part 1)

Usually errors in parallelism are not intentional, and they result in unclear writing. However, sometimes writers will intentionally deviate from the expected parallel structure, a technique that is especially useful for creating emphasis or humor.

To understand this technique, you must first become familiar with the concept of true parallelism, which involves a *precise* repetition of grammatical forms. For example, consider these three sentences about a talented ballerina.

> **The dancer leaped gracefully.**
> **The dancer leaped lightly.**
> **The dancer leaped confidently.**

All of these sentences begin with *the dancer leaped* followed by an adverb. When consolidating these grammatically correct sentences into a single sentence with parallel structure, the sentence becomes:

> **The dancer leaped <u>gracefully</u>, <u>lightly</u>, and <u>confidently</u>.**

Notice that all of the adverbs in the list end in the suffix *-ly*. This creates a very strong and precise parallelism that has a songlike quality.

Why Would Writers Choose to Break Parallel Structure? (Part 2)

However, not all adverbs in the English language end in the suffix *-ly*. What if, for example, the dancer had leaped *far* instead of *confidently*? You cannot say that someone leaped *farly* in English, so the sentence would have to read as:

The dancer leaped <u>gracefully</u>, <u>lightly</u>, and <u>far</u>.

Does this sentence have parallel structure? Yes, the sentence does indeed have parallel structure because all the grammatical forms in the list are adverbs. However, the parallel structure is not as strong or precise as when all the adverbs ended in *-ly*, and the songlike quality is lost. Though the second parallel structure may not flow as smoothly as the first, the important thing is that it is grammatically correct.

Why Would Writers Choose to Break Parallel Structure? (Part 3)

If creating true parallelism is not possible, either due to the nature of word structures or of the message you want to convey, then consider placing the "mismatching" item last in a series, if possible. This strategy is particularly helpful when the last item is a longer phrase relative to the other items in the series, as you can see in this example.

The dancer leaped <u>gracefully</u>, <u>lightly</u>, and <u>too far for her partner to catch her</u>.

Why Would Writers Choose to Break Parallel Structure? (Part 4)

When writers intentionally break parallel structure, they usually employ the strategy of ending on an unexpected note. The effect can be one of stirring emotion or witty humor.

Consider this example of how breaking parallel structure can create humor.

> **I keep myself active all day.**
>
> **Throughout the morning, I go swimming.**
> **Throughout the afternoon, I go cycling.**
> **Throughout the evening, I run my mouth.**

Can you identify the pattern that the writer has created with parallel structure? The pattern established in the first sentence of the list is:

> **Throughout the + (*time period*), + I go + (*-ing verb*).**

By the third item of the series, the reader is expecting a continuation of the pattern, perhaps something such as:

> **Throughout the evening, I go running.**

However, the writer deviates from what is expected and uses a grammar pattern that is different from the established precedent.

> **Throughout the evening, I run my mouth.**
> **Throughout the + (*time period*), + I + (*simple present tense verb*) + (*direct object*).**

Rather than creating confusion, the jarring effect of breaking parallelism in this example results in humor. Skilled comedians are especially adept at delivering punch lines that are least expected yet extremely funny.

Why Would Writers Choose to Break Parallel Structure? (Part 5)

Consider this example of how breaking parallel structure can create an emotional emphasis.

> **Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.**

When Barack Obama spoke these words during his first presidential Inaugural Address, he used correct parallelism because all three items that he lists are verbs: *pick*, *dust*, and *begin*.

However, this excerpt from his speech does not follow true parallelism. To maintain true parallelism, the sentence would have to follow the grammar structure that is set up with the first item in the series.

> (*verb*) + **ourselves** + (*preposition*)

An example following true parallelism might be:

> **Starting today, we must <u>pick ourselves up</u>, <u>dust ourselves off</u>, and <u>carry ourselves forward</u>.**

The advantage of maintaining true parallelism is that it offers a satisfying and predictable rhythm, as if saying, "One two three." But there is also an advantage to breaking true parallelism with an unexpected ending, as if saying, "One two TEN." The dramatic emphasis at the end can make the last point especially memorable and electrifying. Thus, Obama's choice to break true parallelism by ending his statement with the declaration that Americans must "begin again the work of remaking America" is actually preferable to using true parallelism throughout the statement.