



PARALLELISM

Parallel phrases in your sentences mark the rhythms of your language and the rhyme of your thought. Acquiring an ear for parallelism, then the zest for using it, makes your prose strong and emphatic, and will show readers that you have effective control of an argument's weight and direction.

Basically, parallelism is the pairing of words or phrases similar in sound. That sound-parallel can be alliterative ("similar in sound") or by length and rhythmic stress ("government of the people, by the people, and for the people," "the rhythms of your language and the rhyme of your thought").

But the real power of the technique is in harmonizing the sound of the sentence with its sense. Take *antithesis*, for example, the rhetorical technique balancing contrasts or opposites:

"Ambition in a man is praised; ambition in a woman damned."

or

"Jack Sprat could eat no fat; his wife could eat no lean."

or

"I would give my life for a man who is looking for the truth, but I would gladly kill a man who thinks that he has found the truth." (Luis Bunuel)

In each of these, the echo is not only built on sound, but on syntax that strongly balances the contrasting ideas--the semicolon making the clauses independent and equal, the "but" signaling a reversal of direction. In general, when your writing contrasts two ideas or points of view, hunt for the parallel phrasing to make that contrast pointed and memorable. Sentences using *neither/nor*, *either/or*, or *not only/but* are great candidates:

"Neither a borrower nor a lender be." (Shakespeare)

"Not only were we naked, starving, and far from our little homes, but we were without any good books as well." (Karen Gordon)

Of course, parallel structures are not just for opposites. Whether as the pithy two-part contrast or the long rolling swells of Churchill and Martin Luther King Jr., parallel structures are favored by preacher, politician, and comic alike, paying off for any writer/speaker in strong concentrations of rhythm and reason—exhibiting the author's mastery of both. At the very best, it shows passion, strength of voice.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (Martin Luther King Jr.)

"I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all." (Ecclesiastes, King James Bible)

"We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender." (Winston Churchill)

"Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." (John F. Kennedy/Pierre Salinger)

So when you think you have an opportunity—

to sharpen a contrast,

to roll together a series of examples,

to build momentum toward a punchline

begin balancing your phrases and hunting for a parallel vocabulary. Deployed well, parallel structures can add power and elegance to your prose.

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