Rules for Finding and Fixing Errors in Parallel Structure

Understand the problem.

For a list of actions or items, you must maintain ***parallel structure***. To do this, use equal grammatical units. If the first item is a ***noun***, then the following items must also be nouns; if the first item is a ***verb***, then make the other items verbs as well.

Nonparallel structure looks like this:

At the garden store, Larissa bought , , and .

At the garden store, Larissa bought ***pink plastic flamingos***, ***ceramic gnomes***, and ***then she impulsively added a concrete mermaid to her cart***.

Parallel structure, the correct way to write, looks like this:

At the garden store, Larissa bought , , and .

At the garden store, Larissa , , and .

At the garden store, Larissa bought ***pink plastic flamingos***, ***ceramic gnomes***, and a ***concrete mermaid***.

At the garden store, Larissa ***bought*** pink plastic flamingos, ***rescued*** ceramic gnomes from the sale bin, and impulsively ***added*** a concrete mermaid to her cart.

Know the solution.

Once you discover a nonparallel item, you have two options. First, you can make it conform to the other grammatical items in the sentence.

Look at this example:

> We spent the hour in the waiting room ***reading*** old magazines, ***eating*** stale cookies from the vending machine, and ***we wiggled*** on the hard plastic chairs.

Reading old magazines and ***eating stale cookies*** are ***participle phrases***; ***we wiggled on hard plastic chairs***, however, is a ***main clause***.

If we fix the nonparallel item, the sentence looks like this:

> We spent the hour in the waiting room ***reading*** old magazines, ***eating*** stale cookies from the vending machine, and ***wiggling*** on the hard plastic chairs.

Or we can alter the first two items and have this version instead:

> In the waiting room, we ***read*** old magazines, ***ate*** stale cookies from the vending machine, and ***wiggled*** on the hard plastic chairs.

Recognize these special cases.

Not only … but also, ***either … or***, and ***neither … nor*** all require special attention when you are proofreading for parallelism. These ***correlative conjunctions*** require equal grammatical units after both parts of the conjunction.

You can have two ***main clauses*** like this:

> Not only ***did Jerome buy flowers for his mother***, but ***he*** also ***purchased a bouquet for Yolanda, his wife***.

For a shorter sentence, use two ***prepositional phrases***:

> Jerome bought flowers not only ***for his mother*** but also ***for Yolanda, his wife***.

Or you can have two ***nouns*** as this version does:

> Jerome bought flowers for not only ***his mother*** but also ***Yolanda, his wife***.

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