Finding and Fixing Errors in Parallel Structure

Understand the problem.

A list of items must maintain parallel structure. To do this, use consistent 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 has inconsistent format:

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.

In parallel structure, the correct way to write, all items match:

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 list.
Read this example:

In the waiting room, we spent an hour 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, we have consistency:

In the waiting room, we spent an hour *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 to create 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.