

# THE ITEM IN A SERIES

## Recognize an item in a series when you find one.

---

Items in a series occur whenever a sentence lists two or more things. The items can be any type of grammatical unit, such as **nouns**, **verbs**, **participles**, **infinitives**, or **subordinate clauses**, to name a few.

Read these examples:

To make her famous muffins, Paulette bought fresh **broccoli**, baker's **chocolate**, **flour**, **sugar**, and **eggs**.

**Broccoli**, **chocolate**, **flour**, **sugar**, and **eggs** = list of nouns.

After Chad **clutched** his heart, **swooned**, and **fell** to the floor, Professor Borglum nudged him with her foot, ordering him to the front of the class to make his speech.

**Clutched**, **swooned**, and **fell** = list of verbs.

When Harold saw his girlfriend Gloria across the crowded airport, he sprinted toward her, **leaping** over luggage, **colliding** with travelers, and **dodging** potted palms.

**Leaping**, **colliding**, and **dodging** = list of present participles.

Because Tara is hungry but broke, she hopes **to spot** Anthony in the cafeteria, **flirt** with him over a pizza, and then **get** the poor boy to pay for the meal.

**To spot**, **to flirt**, and **to get** = list of infinitives (In a series, you do not need to repeat **to** after the first one).

My dog Floyd bolts under the bed **whenever thunder booms**, **strangers knock on the door**, or I **reach for the flea shampoo**.

**Whenever thunder booms**, **whenever strangers knock on the door**, and **whenever I reach for the flea shampoo** = list of subordinate clauses (The

**subordinate conjunction** *whenever* is understood to repeat even if you do not include it).

## Maintain parallel structure with items in a series.

---

Items in a series should have **parallel structure**. You maintain parallelism when you 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 **subordinate clause**, then so must the other items be.

*Nonparallel* structure is lopsided like this:

Harry spent his afternoon  ,  , and .

Harry spent his afternoon **playing** tennis, **returning** overdue library books, and then **he ate** a mushroom and pineapple pizza.

*Parallel* structure, the correct way to list items in a series, has this format:

Harry spent his afternoon  ,  , and .

Harry spent his afternoon  ,  , and .

Harry spent his afternoon **playing** tennis, **returning** overdue library books, and **eating** a mushroom and pineapple pizza.

This afternoon, Harry **played** tennis, **returned** overdue library books, and **ate** a mushroom and pineapple pizza.

## Punctuate items in a series correctly.

---

Whenever you have three or more items in a series, each item requires punctuation to separate it from the others. Depending on the complexity of the list, you can use either **commas** or **semicolons**.

## SERIES WITH COMMAS

The most common pattern has this format:

**Item** + , + **Item** + , + and + **Item**

Here are examples:

To survive another boring art history lecture, you should **drink** a strong cup of coffee before class, **empty** sugar packets into your mouth when Professor Lemon has his back turned, **and sharpen** a pencil to poke yourself in the thigh.

Stephanie refuses to go water-skiing with us because she is afraid of **getting** sliced by the boat propeller, **tangling** with a snake, **becoming** an alligator's lunch, **or having** a brain-sucking amoeba crawl up her nose.

Some handbooks and style guides will tell you that the comma before the last item in the series—the *serial* comma—is unnecessary. Although you do have the option of leaving it out, the editorial policy of many magazines, newspapers, and book companies is to use a comma before the **coordinating conjunction**. You will, as a result, notice its presence in many of the professional publications that you read.

## SERIES WITH SEMICOLONS

Use **semicolons** to separate the items when they already include commas. The pattern looks like this:

**Item** + , + More Information + ; + **Item** + , + More Information + ; + and + **Item** + , + More Information

Read these examples:

My heroes are **Batman**, who combines brains and brawn; **Captain Picard**, who commands respect; and **Wiley Coyote**, who never gives up.

What a day! Poor Veronica spent **the morning** cooking, cleaning, and washing; **the afternoon** running errands, grocery shopping, and studying; and **this evening** ironing, making lunches, and brushing the dog.

