

chicago manual of style for literary parallelism

The Chicago Manual of Style for Literary Parallelism: A Comprehensive Guide

chicago manual of style for literary parallelism is a cornerstone of elegant and effective writing, particularly within literary contexts. Achieving stylistic harmony and clarity often hinges on the skillful application of parallel structures. This guide delves into the principles and practices of parallelism as outlined by the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS), exploring its definition, its importance in various writing forms, and common pitfalls to avoid. We will examine how parallelism enhances rhythm, emphasizes meaning, and contributes to the overall aesthetic of a literary work, providing practical advice for writers seeking to master this essential rhetorical device. Understanding and implementing CMOS guidelines for parallelism can elevate prose from merely functional to truly artful.

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Understanding Literary Parallelism

Literary parallelism, fundamentally, is the principle of using the same grammatical structure to express related ideas. This technique involves arranging words, phrases, clauses, or even entire sentences in a balanced and consistent form. When writers employ parallelism, they create a sense of rhythm and flow that makes their prose more engaging and memorable for the reader. It's not merely about grammatical correctness; it's about crafting a deliberate and pleasing sonic and semantic experience.

The core idea behind parallelism is equivalence. When two or more elements are presented as coordinate, meaning they share a similar function or level of importance within the sentence or passage, they should ideally be presented in a parallel form. This might mean using a series of verbs in the same tense, a list of nouns with similar modifiers, or subordinate clauses that mirror each other in structure. The visual and auditory symmetry created by parallelism can significantly enhance the clarity and impact of the writer's message.

The Importance of Parallelism in Writing

The significance of parallelism in writing cannot be overstated, especially in literary endeavors. It serves multiple crucial functions that contribute to both the aesthetic appeal and the communicative power of prose. One of its primary roles is to enhance clarity and comprehension. By presenting related ideas in a consistent grammatical form, parallelism helps readers to quickly grasp the connections between these ideas and to follow the writer's train of thought without interruption.

Beyond clarity, parallelism imbues writing with a powerful sense of rhythm and musicality. This rhythmic quality can make prose more captivating and enjoyable to read aloud, drawing the reader in and holding their attention. Furthermore, parallelism is an effective tool for emphasis. When elements are structured in a parallel manner, they tend to stand out, allowing the writer to draw particular attention to the ideas being conveyed and to highlight their importance or relationship to one another. This rhetorical force makes parallelism a beloved tool for poets, essayists, and novelists alike.

Enhancing Readability and Flow

One of the most immediate benefits of employing parallelism is the significant improvement in readability. Sentences that utilize parallel structures are often easier to process because the brain can more readily identify the patterns and relationships between the components. This predictability in grammatical form reduces cognitive load, allowing the reader to focus on the content rather than struggling to decode complex or disjointed sentence structures. The resulting smooth flow creates a more immersive reading experience.

Achieving Emphasis and Impact

Parallelism is a potent tool for rhetorical emphasis. By presenting ideas in a balanced, symmetrical form, writers can underscore their significance. When a series of actions, qualities, or concepts are listed in parallel, each item receives a comparable weight and prominence. This creates a cumulative effect, making the overall point more forceful and memorable. Think of famous speeches or iconic literary passages; many owe their enduring power to the strategic use of parallelism for maximum impact.

Types of Parallel Structures

Parallelism can manifest in various forms, from simple word pairings to complex clausal structures. The key is that the grammatical form employed for each element in a series or comparison should be consistent. Recognizing these different types is crucial for both applying parallelism effectively and for identifying instances where it is lacking or incorrectly implemented.

Words in Series

The most basic form of parallelism involves a series of words of the same grammatical type. This commonly includes a list of nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs. For example, a writer might list three nouns: "He packed his bags, his passport, and his hopes for the future." Or a series of verbs: "She ran, jumped, and swam with effortless grace." The consistency in form ensures that each item is perceived as a distinct but related part of the whole.

Phrases in Series

Parallelism can extend to phrases as well. This often involves prepositional phrases, infinitive phrases, or participial phrases. For instance, "She found solace in reading, in walking through the woods, and in listening to music." Here, three prepositional phrases begin with "in" and describe where she found solace. Similarly, infinitive phrases can be parallel: "To err is human; to forgive, divine." The parallel structure highlights the contrasting but related concepts.

Clauses in Series

When parallelism involves larger units like clauses, it can create a more profound sense of balance and rhythm. This is particularly evident in independent clauses joined by conjunctions or in dependent clauses that serve a similar function within a sentence. A classic example is: "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets." The repetition of the structure "we shall fight on/in..." lends immense power to the declaration.

Balanced Sentences

A balanced sentence, often referred to as a compound sentence in its simplest form, features two or more clauses that are similar in grammatical structure, length, and often, meaning. This creates a sense of symmetry and contrast. For example, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." The direct parallel between the two opposing sentiments makes the statement both

memorable and impactful. This stylistic choice is frequently employed to present opposing ideas or to create a sense of completeness.

Parallelism in Different Literary Genres

The application of parallelism can vary subtly across different literary genres, though its fundamental purpose remains the same: to enhance clarity, rhythm, and impact. Writers in each genre leverage parallelism to suit the specific demands and conventions of their craft, contributing to the unique voice and style of their work.

Fiction

In fiction, parallelism is often used to develop character, establish mood, or advance the plot. A character's internal monologue might employ parallel structures to reveal their fragmented thoughts or their determined resolve. Descriptive passages can use parallelism to create vivid imagery by listing similar sensory details in a balanced way. For example, describing a bustling market might involve parallel phrases detailing sights, sounds, and smells, drawing the reader into the scene more effectively. The rhythm it imparts can also contribute significantly to the narrative's pacing and emotional resonance.

Poetry

Poetry is perhaps the genre where parallelism is most visibly and powerfully employed. The inherent musicality of verse makes parallel structures a natural fit for enhancing rhythm, meter, and sonic effect. Repetition, a key element in much poetry, often relies on parallelism to create its impact. Consider anaphora, the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences, which is a direct manifestation of parallel construction. This technique can build intensity, create a chant-like effect, or emphasize a central theme or emotion. The careful arrangement of parallel lines or stanzas can guide the reader's experience and deepen the poem's meaning.

Essays and Nonfiction Prose

While often associated with more overtly literary forms, parallelism is also vital in essays and other forms of nonfiction prose. It helps to organize complex arguments, clarify distinctions, and make persuasive points more compelling. In academic writing, parallel structures can ensure that lists of

evidence or components of an argument are presented in a clear, logical, and easily digestible manner. In persuasive essays, parallelism can be used to build a strong rhetorical case by presenting a series of related points in a balanced and impactful way, making the author's argument more convincing and memorable for the reader.

Common Errors in Parallel Construction

Despite its benefits, parallelism is a technique that can be easily misused, leading to awkwardness or unintended confusion. Recognizing common errors is the first step toward avoiding them and ensuring that parallelism serves its intended purpose. These errors often arise from a lack of attention to grammatical consistency or an oversight in sentence construction.

Mixed Grammatical Forms

One of the most frequent errors is mixing grammatical forms within a parallel structure. This occurs when a list or comparison begins with one type of word or phrase and then abruptly switches to another without maintaining the established pattern. For instance, a sentence like "She enjoys hiking, to swim, and reading books" is flawed because it mixes a gerund ("hiking"), an infinitive ("to swim"), and a gerund phrase ("reading books") in a series that should ideally be consistent, perhaps "She enjoys hiking, swimming, and reading books." This inconsistency breaks the natural flow and disrupts the intended parallelism.

Faulty Comparisons

Parallelism is also essential for making clear and logical comparisons. When comparing two items, the structure used for each item must be parallel. An error occurs when the comparison is illogical or grammatically inconsistent. For example, "The climate of Rome is more temperate than Phoenix" is faulty because it compares a noun ("climate") to a proper noun ("Phoenix"). A corrected version would be "The climate of Rome is more temperate than the climate of Phoenix," or "Rome's climate is more temperate than Phoenix's." Without parallel structures, comparisons can become nonsensical.

Unbalanced Series

Another common pitfall is creating an unbalanced series where one element is disproportionately long or complex compared to the others, or where one element is intended to be parallel but is grammatically distinct. For

example, "He decided to leave, to seek new opportunities, and that he would not look back" mixes infinitive phrases with a subordinate clause. To be parallel, it should be: "He decided to leave, to seek new opportunities, and not to look back." The imbalance can make the series feel disjointed and detract from the overall aesthetic and clarity.

CMOS Guidance on Parallelism

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) addresses parallelism not as a prescriptive set of rules, but as a matter of clarity, consistency, and rhetorical effectiveness. While CMOS doesn't dedicate a single, monolithic chapter solely to "parallelism," its principles are woven throughout sections on punctuation, sentence structure, and style. The core tenet is that related ideas should be expressed in similar grammatical forms to ensure smooth reading and logical connection.

CMOS emphasizes that the primary goal of parallelism is to guide the reader. When elements are presented in parallel, their relationship to each other becomes immediately apparent. This is particularly important in lists, series, and comparisons. The Manual advises writers to review their sentences to ensure that if they are presenting items of equal weight or function, those items should mirror each other grammatically. This applies whether the elements are single words, phrases, or entire clauses. The emphasis is on maintaining the integrity of the grammatical structure that has been established.

Consistency in Lists and Series

CMOS strongly advocates for consistency when presenting items in a list or series. If a sentence introduces a series of actions, and the first action is expressed as a gerund, then all subsequent actions in that series should also be expressed as gerunds. For example, if a sentence states, "The report included an analysis of market trends, a projection of future sales, and recommendations for improvement," CMOS would affirm this parallel structure using noun phrases. Conversely, a sentence like "The report included analyzing market trends, projecting future sales, and recommendations for improvement" would be considered inconsistent and less effective.

Parallelism in Comparisons

The Manual also implicitly supports parallelism when it comes to comparisons. For a comparison to be logical and clear, the items being compared must be grammatically equivalent. CMOS guidance on clarity and avoiding ambiguity

indirectly addresses this. If a writer compares the "speed of a cheetah" with "a lion's strength," the comparison is problematic because it juxtaposes a noun phrase with a possessive noun phrase in a way that might be confusing if not carefully constructed. A more parallel and clear construction would be "the speed of a cheetah and the strength of a lion," or "a cheetah's speed and a lion's strength."

Clarity and Rhetorical Effect

CMOS prioritizes clarity and effective communication. Parallelism is presented as a tool that directly contributes to these aims. By making sentence structures predictable and balanced, writers can avoid misinterpretation and enhance the impact of their prose. The Manual encourages writers to use parallelism not just for grammatical correctness, but for its rhetorical power – to create rhythm, emphasize points, and make their writing more engaging and memorable. It is about crafting prose that is both precise and aesthetically pleasing.

Applying Parallelism in Editing and Revision

The process of editing and revision is where the deliberate application and refinement of parallelism truly shine. It is during this stage that writers can critically assess their sentences for opportunities to strengthen structure, improve clarity, and enhance the overall flow and impact of their work. Often, what might seem like a minor grammatical adjustment can lead to significant improvements in readability and rhetorical force.

When reviewing a draft, pay close attention to sentences that contain multiple related ideas. Look for places where lists, comparisons, or series of actions are presented. Ask yourself if the grammatical form used for each item is consistent. If you discover inconsistencies, consider how you might rephrase certain elements to achieve the desired parallel structure. This might involve changing verbs to the same tense, converting phrases to a similar type, or ensuring that clauses maintain a consistent grammatical relationship.

Self-Editing Techniques for Parallelism

Effective self-editing for parallelism involves a systematic approach. Read your sentences aloud, listening for awkward phrasing or a lack of rhythm, which can often signal a problem with parallel structure. Underlining or highlighting series of words, phrases, or clauses can help you visually identify potential areas for improvement. Check that all items in a list

share the same grammatical form (e.g., all nouns, all gerunds, all infinitive phrases). Similarly, in comparisons, ensure that the entities being compared are grammatically congruent. Don't hesitate to reorder words or rephrase entire clauses to achieve the desired balance and consistency.

Using Tools for Identification

While human judgment is paramount, some digital tools can assist in identifying potential parallelism issues. Grammar checkers, while not infallible, can sometimes flag sentences that exhibit grammatical inconsistencies within a series. These tools can serve as a helpful starting point, prompting you to examine a sentence more closely. However, it is crucial to remember that these are aids, not replacements for careful human review. The nuanced understanding of meaning and intent that a writer brings to the editing process is irreplaceable when ensuring that parallelism is used effectively and appropriately.

Enhancing Readability and Impact with Parallelism

The ultimate goal of employing literary parallelism, guided by the principles found within the Chicago Manual of Style, is to enhance both the readability and the impact of the written word. By creating predictable and harmonious sentence structures, writers make it easier for their audience to absorb and appreciate the content. The aesthetic qualities of well-executed parallelism contribute significantly to a reader's overall experience, making the text more engaging and memorable.

The consistent grammatical forms inherent in parallelism act as signposts for the reader, guiding them through complex ideas or lengthy descriptions with greater ease. This clarity, combined with the inherent rhythm and balance of parallel structures, elevates prose from being merely functional to being artful. Whether it's a poignant description in a novel, a persuasive argument in an essay, or an evocative stanza in a poem, the strategic use of parallelism ensures that the writer's message is not only understood but also felt and remembered. It is a powerful technique for achieving stylistic elegance and rhetorical mastery.

FAQ

Q: What is the primary purpose of using literary parallelism according to the Chicago Manual of Style?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style emphasizes that the primary purpose of literary parallelism is to enhance clarity and rhetorical effectiveness. By using similar grammatical structures for related ideas, writers make their prose easier for the reader to understand, create a pleasing rhythm, and effectively emphasize their points.

Q: Does the Chicago Manual of Style offer specific rules for every instance of parallelism?

A: No, the Chicago Manual of Style does not offer rigid, prescriptive rules for every single instance of parallelism. Instead, it focuses on the principles of clarity, consistency, and stylistic effectiveness, advising writers to use parallel structures where they enhance comprehension and create a harmonious flow, particularly in lists, comparisons, and series of clauses.

Q: How does the Chicago Manual of Style address parallelism in lists?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style strongly advises consistency in lists. If a list contains items that are grammatically distinct, it can lead to awkwardness and reduced clarity. CMOS advocates for using the same grammatical form for all items in a series, whether they are words, phrases, or clauses, to ensure balance and ease of understanding.

Q: Can parallelism be used in technical or academic writing, or is it primarily for literary works?

A: While parallelism is a hallmark of literary writing, it is equally valuable in technical and academic writing. The Chicago Manual of Style's emphasis on clarity and logical organization makes parallelism a crucial tool for presenting complex information, arguments, and data in a structured and accessible manner, thereby improving readability.

Q: What are the common grammatical forms that can be used in parallel structures?

A: Common grammatical forms used in parallel structures include nouns, verbs (in the same tense and form), adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, infinitive phrases, gerund phrases, and independent or subordinate clauses. The key is to maintain consistency among these forms when they are presented

as coordinate elements.

Q: How does faulty parallelism affect the reader's experience?

A: Faulty parallelism can disrupt the reader's experience by creating awkwardness, reducing clarity, and diminishing the intended impact. When grammatical structures are inconsistent in a series or comparison, the reader may struggle to understand the relationship between ideas or may be pulled out of the flow of the text, hindering comprehension and appreciation.

Q: Are there specific examples in the Chicago Manual of Style that illustrate good parallelism?

A: While CMOS provides extensive guidance on grammar and style, it often illustrates principles through advice on clarity and consistency rather than by offering a dedicated list of parallelism examples. However, its discussions on sentence structure, punctuation for series, and avoiding ambiguity implicitly demonstrate the value and application of correct parallelism.

Q: How can a writer ensure they are using parallelism effectively without overdoing it?

A: Effective use of parallelism involves understanding its purpose: to enhance clarity, rhythm, and emphasis. Writers should apply it where it naturally aids comprehension and creates a pleasing structure, particularly in lists, comparisons, and balanced sentences. Overuse can lead to monotony; therefore, judicious application, guided by context and desired effect, is key. The Chicago Manual of Style's emphasis on natural flow and clarity implicitly guides against forced or excessive use.

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