



Writer's Camp



The Power of Parallelism

Cynthia Saver, MS, RN

Writer's Camp Counselor

Parallel structure is a simple writing tool that packs a powerful punch.

Writers might not have superpowers like Superman, Wonder Woman, and others in the DC Universe, but we can use powers (tools) to improve the effectiveness of our writing. One of the most powerful tools—and one of the easiest to learn—is parallelism.

What is Parallelism?

Parallelism, or parallel structure, refers to keeping a consistent structure for words, phrases, or clauses within a bulleted or numbered list or within a sentence.¹⁻³ Doing so promotes cohesion, which makes it easier for the reader to follow the text.¹⁻³ Here's an example³:

Not parallel: The parts of the nursing process are *assessing*, *to plan*, *implement*, and *evaluating*.

Parallel: The parts of the nursing process are *assessing*, *planning*, *implementing*, and *evaluating*.

Note that in the first example, the words in italics don't have the same structure. For example: *implement* and *evaluating* don't match. But in the parallel version, all the italicized words are verbs ending in "ing" like *implementing* and *evaluating*.

Here's another example³:

Not parallel: The patients *warmed up*, *were asked* to walk 2 miles, and a notebook *was used* to record the activity.

Parallel: The patients *warmed up*, *walked* 2 miles, and *recorded* their activity.

Notice that in the parallel version, the verbs are still in the past tense (as they were in the nonparallel version), but because the format for each is the same with an "ed" at the end, the sentence is easier to read. The parallel version has the additional advantage of clarifying who recorded the activity.

Why Parallelism Matters

Parallel structure makes it easier for a reader to comprehend your work. In both of the examples above, the nonparallel example is harder to follow—in turn, the reader will need to work harder to understand what is written. My philosophy as a writer is "Never make the readers work to understand." As authors, we want readers to think, do, or feel. For instance, you may want readers to think about how their own attitudes align with participants of a study on clinician bias. Maybe you want them to change their practice by using a better assessment tool, or you may want them to feel empathy towards patients who seem rude because they are scared. If you distract from your key points by making it difficult for readers to absorb the information, they will likely miss important messages—or simply stop reading.

Also consider that readers make decisions about what to read based on value, which consists of the benefits of the information provided vs. the effort or "cost" it takes to get the author's point. Think of how value analysis committees evaluate products—the process is similar. Anything you can do to enhance benefits and reduce costs will improve the likelihood that the reader will read what you write.

Promoting Parallelism

Here are examples of how to promote parallelism in different writing situations.

First, let's look at bulleted or numbered lists. Here's an example:

Not parallel: Research supports providing staff with a specific oral care protocol for patients to reduce the incidence of hospital-acquired pneumonia.

- Use a soft-bristle toothbrush or an electric suction toothbrush if the patient can't brush their own teeth.
- The toothpaste should contain sodium bicarbonate.
- It's important to examine the oral cavity, including the teeth and gingiva, thoroughly; for patients receiving antibiotics, watch for oropharyngeal candidiasis.
- Ensure that patients' dentures are cleaned after each meal and before bedtime
- A mouthwash without alcohol is preferred to complete oral care.

Parallel: Research supports providing staff with a specific oral care protocol for patients to reduce the incidence of hospital-acquired pneumonia. Nurses should:

- Use a soft-bristle toothbrush or an electric suction toothbrush if the patient can't brush their own teeth.
- Use toothpaste that contains sodium bicarbonate.
- *Examine* the oral cavity, including the teeth and gingiva, thoroughly; for patients receiving antibiotics, watch for oropharyngeal candidiasis.
- *Ensure* that patients' dentures are cleaned after each meal and before bedtime.
- Use a mouthwash without alcohol to complete oral care.

Note that in the non-parallel version, the bullet points primarily started with either a verb (*Use*, *Ensure*) or a word or two followed by a noun (*The toothpaste*, *A mouthwash*). In the parallel version (adapted from the article "Preventing hospital-acquired pneumonia," published in the February 2020 issue of *American Nurse Journal*⁴), a verb starts each sentence, making it easier to read.

Another writing situation where you want to use parallelism is where you have related phrases or clauses joined by a conjunction, such as "and," "or," and "but." Let's look at an example sentence.

Not parallel: Nurse satisfaction improved by 50%, but physician satisfaction didn't get better by as much—only 10%.

Parallel: Nurse satisfaction increased by 50%, but physician satisfaction increased by only 10%.

The first sentence is valid, but the second one makes the point more directly by using similar terminology to describe the change.

Beyond the Sentence

The goal of parallel structure is to create balance. While parallelism is often discussed in relation to a single sentence, this concept can also help enhance the quality of multiple sentences and even one or more paragraphs.

For example, an article on airway management might include: “The 3-3-2 rule uses three assessments to help predict the difficulty of intubating a patient. The first assessment is..... The second assessment is... The third assessment is...” The repetition of “assessment” guides the reader through the paragraph.

In an article on mechanical ventilation by Gallagher and Adamski,⁵ a section with the heading “Breath Delivery Sequence” started with, “The breath delivery sequence is how the breath is delivered to the patient. The 3 sequences are CMV, IMV, and CSV.” [The abbreviations were defined earlier.] The authors then created three subheadings, one for each sequence. The first paragraph under each subheading started with similar phrasing: “In CMV, the ventilator delivers all the breaths...”, “In IMV, the machine delivers the set number of machine breaths...”, and “In the CSV breath delivery sequence, all breathing is spontaneous.”

I might have phrased the last as “In CSV, all breathing is spontaneous...” to make the parallelism even stronger, but I still think it’s a good example because all of the sentences start with a description of what the sequence does before providing more details. I should add that this article is an excellent example of how to organize a complex topic.

Conclusion: Wield Your Power

Do not hesitate to start using your new power to improve your writing. You’ll soon find that parallel structure becomes second nature and a valuable resource for your writing toolkit.

References

1. Enago Academy. Effective writing skills — parallelism and its importance in academic writing. Published January 31, 2023. Accessed March 10, 2026.

<https://www.enago.com/academy/importance-of-parallelism-in-academic-writing/>

2. Forsaith C. Parallelism: What is parallelism? Definitions and examples. Writing Tips Institute. Published May 8, 2023. Accessed March 10, 2026.

<https://writingtips.org/parallelism/>

3. Saver C. Writing skills lab. In: Saver C. *Anatomy of Writing for Publication for Nurses*. 5th ed. Indianapolis, IN: Sigma Theta Tau International;2024;89-101.

4. Meehan CD, McKenna C. Preventing hospital-acquired pneumonia. *American Nurse Journal*, 2020;15(2):16-21. <https://www.myamericannurse.com/preventing-hospital-acquired-pneumonia/>

5. Gallagher JJ, Adamski JL. Mechanical ventilation: Modes, settings, and clinical considerations. *American Association of Critical-care Nurses Advanced Critical Care*. 2025;36(4):356-373. doi:10.4037/aacnacc2025722

Author: Cynthia Saver

Reviewed and Edited by: Jenny Chicca and Anjie Raber

Copyright © 2026 Writer's Camp and Cynthia Saver

Citation: Saver C. The Power of Parallelism. *The Writer's Camp Journal*, 2026;2(1):19. doi:10.5281/zenodo.19002988

Posted on **March 26, 2026**

Posted in **Writer's Camp Feature**

Previous

CAMPOREE: BEYOND THE CITATION

Don't let someone else's opinion become your reality.

— Les Brown

SUBSCRIBE TO WRITER'S CAMP VIA EMAIL

Enter your email address to subscribe to Writer's Camp and receive notifications of new posts by email.