13 Parallel Structure

Parallel structure (or **parallelism**) is the repetition of a particular grammatical construction within a sentence or paragraph. It is used to indicate that multiple ideas have equal levels of importance. In addition, the use of parallel constructions makes writing clearer and easier for readers to follow.

Parallel structure can be tested in two major ways:

1) In lists: 3 items
2) On either side of a conjunction: 2 items

Parallel Structure with Lists

In any given list of three or more items, each item should appear in the same format: noun, noun, and noun; gerund, gerund, and gerund; verb, verb, and verb. For example, consider the question below.

Healthy marine environments result from a precise balance of factors and are therefore vulnerable to threats from a variety of sources. For example, **changes** in wind circulation, **runoff** from sewage, and _____ can all lead to the creation of ocean waters low in oxygen and inhospitable to marine life.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ to accumulate fertilizers

Ⓑ they accumulate fertilizers

Ⓒ accumulating fertilizers

Ⓓ accumulation of fertilizers

The first two items in the list begin with nouns (*changes*, *runoff*), so the third item must begin with a noun as well. (D) is the only option that begins with a noun ("accumulation"), so it is the only possible answer.

If full lists appear in the answer choices, you can simplify the question by checking the beginning of each item. For example, consider this version of the question from the previous page.

Healthy marine environments result from a precise balance of factors and are therefore vulnerable to threats from a variety of sources. For example, _____ can all lead to the creation of ocean waters low in oxygen and inhospitable to marine life.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ **changes** in wind circulation, **runoff** from sewage, and **accumulating** fertilizers

Ⓑ **changing** wind circulation, **runoff** from sewage, and **accumulating** fertilizers

Ⓒ **changing** wind circulation, **having** runoff from sewage, and **to accumulate** fertilizers

Ⓓ **changes** in wind circulation patterns, **runoff** from sewage, and **accumulation** of **fertilizers**

Once again, (D) is the only option in which each item begins with a noun, so it is correct.

Questions can also test punctuation within lists. Remember from Chapter 7 that the items in a list can be separated by either commas or semicolons, but not both within the same list.

Healthy marine environments result from a precise balance of factors and are therefore vulnerable to threats from a variety of sources. For example, _____ can all lead to the creation of ocean waters low in oxygen and inhospitable to marine life.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ **changes** in wind circulation; **runoff** from sewage, and **accumulating** fertilizers

Ⓑ **changes** in wind circulation, **runoff** from sewage; and **accumulating** fertilizers

Ⓒ **changes** in wind circulation, from sewage there is runoff, and **fertilizers** accumulate

Ⓓ **changes** in wind circulation patterns; **runoff** from sewage; and **accumulation** of **fertilizers**

Both (A) and (B) incorrectly mix colons and semicolons, and (C) is incorrect because the second item does not follow the grammatical pattern. (D) correctly keeps the items consistent and uses only semicolons.

Parallel Structure with Conjunctions

Another type of parallel structure question involves only two items joined by a conjunction (*and, or, but*).

Although these questions are fairly straightforward, you must consider the entire sentence because **the answer is likely to depend on information outside the blank**. For example, consider the question below.

Unlike some animals, most lizards have a highly developed sense of vision. As a result, they are able to use clear body language **and** _____ their colors in order to communicate.

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ alter

Ⓑ altering

Ⓒ they alter

Ⓓ altered

The word *and* connects the underlined item to the non-underlined item, so the two items must match. Note that the repetition of the word *to* is optional. The correct answer could read either "to alter" or "alter," as is the case here. (A) is thus correct.

It is also possible that two-item parallel structure questions will ask you to work with phrases rather than single words. For example:

In recent years, the amount of time and money devoted to books by publishing companies has been reduced by both financial constraints **and** _____

noun

factor

1 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text so that it conforms to the conventions of Standard English?

Ⓐ the emphasis on marketing has increased.

Ⓑ an increased emphasis on marketing.

Ⓒ they have increased the emphasis on marketing.

Ⓓ increasing the emphasis on marketing.

The construction before *and* consists of a noun (*financial constraints*), so the construction after it must begin the same way. Neither (C) nor (D) begins with a noun, so both can be eliminated. (A) incorrectly contains a clause with a verb ("has"), whereas (B) correctly contains only a noun phrase without one.

Exercise: Parallel Structure (answers p. 218)

1. In the insect world, spiders are fearsome animals—the tiny equivalent of wolves, lions or sharks. Spiders use a wide range of strategies to capture _____ in order to avoid detection.

- Ⓐ prey; including trapping it in webs; with sticky bolas they lasso it; and mimicking other insects
- Ⓑ prey, including trapping it in webs, lassoing it with sticky bolas, and they mimic other insects
- Ⓒ prey, including trapping it in webs; lassoing it with sticky bolas; and mimicking other insects
- Ⓓ prey, including trapping it in sticky webs; to lasso it with sticky bolas; and mimicking other insects

2. Scientists have long been uncertain whether dogs can read human emotions, but evidence is growing that canines can accurately "read" what people feel. In fact, a recent study found that dogs are able to distinguish between expressions that indicate happiness and _____

(exp) that + v. + noun.

- Ⓐ those that indicate fear or anger.
- Ⓑ those in which fear or anger are indicated.
- Ⓒ fear in anger are indicated in others.
- Ⓓ indicating fear and anger are others.

3. Without structural engineers, everything could twist and shake apart. Their know-how is vital to mastering green construction's novel materials and innovative practices, whether used to harness the force of the wind or _____

- Ⓐ capture the power that the waves have.
- Ⓑ capturing the power of the waves.
- Ⓒ have captured the power of the waves.
- Ⓓ capture the power of the waves.

4. Haiku poems, which contain just 17 syllables, can describe any person or object, but they are seldom complicated or difficult to understand. Each haiku must contain a *kigo*, a season word that indicates the time of the year in which the haiku is set. For example, blossoms would indicate _____

Ⓐ	spring; snow would give the idea of winter and summertime would be suggested by fireflies.
Ⓑ	spring; snow would give the idea of winter; and fireflies would suggest summertime.
Ⓒ	spring snow would give the idea of winter; and fireflies suggest summertime.
Ⓓ	spring; the idea of winter would be given by snow; and fireflies would suggest summer.

5. For centuries, there have been reports of strange bright lights in the sky just before, during, or after an earthquake. Over the years, descriptions have varied widely: the lights have been described as flaring white streaks, floating orbs, and _____ Sometimes the lights appeared for just a few seconds, but other times they hovered in the sky for minutes or even hours at a time.

Ⓐ	flames that flicker.
Ⓑ	flames that are flickering.
Ⓒ	flames to flicker.
Ⓓ	flickering flames.

- ing + noun.