

Conceptual Parallelism

Visually, a list implies to a reader that its items are comparable. To make your verbal and visual messages match, construct lists so that the items are conceptually and grammatically parallel. In other words, the items should be discrete or non-overlapping, and they should all have the same relationship to the title of the list. The list in the following passage, for example, is conceptually parallel:

Closed-used groups will be charged for usage of the system on an annual basis. This fee will depend on three factors:

- How much the group's members access the system
- How much the group's external database is accessed by other users
- How much the group uses INET's consulting services.

The following list, however, is not conceptually parallel.

These are the results of our investigation:

- All the steps of the process of production were observed.
- The incoming material control showed that 10% of the raw material received is defective; it is recommended to have less than 2% defective in raw material.
- The incoming raw material was kept separated at Receiving.
- Sampling techniques ascertained that some suppliers were furnishing bad lots with more than 20% defective components.

The first and third items of this list describe how the investigation was carried out, while the second and fourth items present the investigation's results. The second item also presents the standard against which one result should be evaluated. Thus the items relate differently to the subheading that precedes them.

The following list also violates conceptual parallelism.

This is an important study for several reasons:

- a) The drought is over so far as rainfall is concerned, but groundwater levels in the NE, SE, and Western regions are still well below normal, according to the DEQE.
- b) Water superintendents in these regions are begging for help before the next drought in persuading their industrial users that water conservation is cost effective.
- c) The proposed study can serve as a persuasive tool by demonstrating saving in a cross section of industries, and will be most effective while the memory of the last drought is still fresh.

Every item in this list is not a reason why this study is important. Instead, the items form an interlocking logical chain that culminates in the final item. Thus the list format is misleading, and the argument would be better presented in paragraph form.

Are these lists grammatically and conceptually parallel?

Example 1

In its study, the task force discovered that excessive breakage occurs when packers fail to:

- Use styrofoam between each layer of test tubes
- Pad the tubes adequately
- Seal the cartons securely
- Meet standards because of inadequate training

Example 2

The report made several recommendations for increasing production at the satellite facilities:

- Create a more expertly trained workforce
- An early retirement policy should be put into effect
- Implementation of an improved information delivery system
- Further studies will be done to gauge worker satisfaction

Example 3

We should discontinue working with our supplier:

- He is late with shipments
- We must shut down the assembly line while waiting for needed parts
- Delays cause missed deadlines
- The cost to the company is in hundreds of thousands of dollars