Parallelism: a mini-lesson

Also called:
Parallel structure
Parallel syntax
What is Parallel Structure?

- Parallel structure involves putting together elements of similar structure to achieve balanced writing.
- Winston Churchill did **not** say: “I have nothing to offer but bleeding, toil, tears, and sweating.”
- He said: “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.”
- Churchill understood parallelism.
Use parallelism in your own writing

- Good parallel structure improves the clarity of your writing.
- To make your writing parallel, use the same grammatical form for all items in a list.
Poor: Betty has intelligence, honesty, and she is funny.

Improved: Betty has intelligence, honesty, and **humour**.

Poor: Good writing requires you to plan outlines, write several drafts, and revision.

Improved: Good writing requires you to plan outlines, write several drafts, and **revise your work**
• **WRONG:** A good attitude, being on time, and speaking effectively are her attributes.

• **RIGHT:** Having a good attitude, being on time, and speaking effectively are her attributes.
• **WRONG:** This proposal is profitable, timely, and it helps us.

• **RIGHT:** This proposal is profitable, timely, and helpful.
LET’S PRACTICE!!!

• Many gases are invisible, odorless, and they have no taste.
• Many gases are invisible, odorless, and **tasteless**.
• Mr. Foster is not only an excellent barber but also sings well.
• Mr. Foster is not only an excellent barber but also **a good singer**.
Be able to Identify Parallelism used by Professional Writers

• Sentences or parts of a sentence are parallel when structures within them take the same form.

• Parallelism is important at the level of
  ▫ the word
  ▫ the phrase
  ▫ the clause
Parallelism at **Word** level

• “Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?” (-- Henry David Thoreau)

• In this sentence, the words *hurry* and *waste*, both nouns, follow the preposition *with*; *hurry* and *waste* are parallel.
Parallelism at **Word** level  
(another example)

- “In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime.”  
  (-- Henry David Thoreau)

- In this sentence, the words *true* and *sublime*, both adjectives, modify the pronoun *something*; *true* and *sublime* are parallel.
Parallelism at **Phrase** level

- “Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man.” (Henry David Thoreau)

- To modify the adjective *remote* in this sentence, Thoreau uses parallel prepositional phrases: *in the outskirts, before the farthest star, before Adam, and after the last man.*
Parallelism at Phrase level (another example)

• “This is more difficult, because there is no zeitgeist to read, no template to follow, no mask to wear.” (Anna Quindlen)
• Here, the writer uses three parallel nouns each preceded by no and each followed by an infinitive.
Parallelism at **Phrase** level (another example)

- “[I]t has truly been said that never in history have so many educated people devoted so much attention to so few children.” (Jane Howard)
- Here, the writer uses three parallel noun phrases, each beginning with *so*. 
Lack of Parallelism

• “[I]t has truly been said that never in history have so many educated people devoted so much attention to so few children.” (Jane Howard)

• Here’s what Howard’s sentence might look like if it lacked parallelism:

• It has truly been said that never in history have a lot of people who are well educated devoted their attention to such a small number of children.

• This version of the sentence is harder to read and easier to forget.
Parallelism at **Clause** level

• “If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.”
   
   (Henry David Thoreau)

• Here, the writer begins with a dependent clause (**If . . . dying**) followed by an independent, or main, clause (**let . . . extremities**); then after the semicolon, Thoreau presents another dependent-independent construction, parallel to the first.
Parallelism at Clause level (another example)

• “[W]e perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence, that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality.” (Henry David Thoreau)

• This example contains two parallel dependent clauses, each beginning with *that* and functioning as an object of the verb *perceive*. 
Purpose or Effect of Parallelism

- Writers use parallelism as a rhetorical and stylistic device:
  - to **emphasize** ideas,
  - to **contrast** ideas,
  - to **connect** ideas.

Note: You will see many questions about parallelism on the multiple choice section of the AP Exam. Remember that you are looking for repeating structure (at some level).