Parallel construction, also called parallelism, shows that two or more ideas are equally important by stating them in grammatically parallel form: noun lined up with noun, verb with verb, phrase with phrase. Parallelism can lend clarity, elegance, and symmetry to what you say:

I came;
I saw;
I conquered.

—Julius Caesar

Using three simple verbs to list the things he did, Caesar makes coming, seeing, and conquering all equal in importance. He also implies that for him, conquering was as easy as coming and seeing.

In many ways writing is the act of saying I,
of imposing oneself upon other people,
of saying listen to me, see it my way,
change your mind.

—Joan Didion

Didion gives equal importance to saying I, imposing oneself, and voicing certain commands. Furthermore, she builds one parallel construction into another. Using a series of imperative verbs, she puts equal weight on listen, see, and change. The result is a rhetorically commanding definition of the act of writing.
We look for signs in every strange event; we search for heroes in every unknown face.

—Alice Walker

Walker stresses our searching by making the second half of this sentence exactly parallel with the first.

16.2 WRITING PARALLEL CONSTRUCTIONS

To write parallel constructions, put two or more coordinate items into the same grammatical form:

I have nothing to offer but *blood, toil, tears, and sweat.*

—Winston Churchill

Churchill uses four nouns to identify what he offers the British people in wartime.

. . . and that government *of the people, by the people, for the people* shall not perish from the earth.

—Abraham Lincoln

Lincoln uses three prepositional phrases to describe the essential characteristics of American democracy.

On all these shores there are echoes of *past and future: of the flow of time, obliterating yet containing* all that has gone before.

—Rachel Carson

Carson uses two prepositional phrases about time, and then a pair of participles to contrast its effects.

_We must indeed all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately._

—Benjamin Franklin

Franklin uses two parallel clauses to stress the difference between two equally pressing alternatives.

*A living dog* is better than *a dead lion.*

—Ecclesiastes

The likeness in form between the two phrases lets us clearly see how much they differ in meaning.
Correlatives are words or phrases used in pairs to join words, phrases, or clauses. The principal correlatives are *both . . . and, not only . . . but also, either . . . or, neither . . . nor, and whether . . . or.* When using correlatives to highlight a parallel construction, be sure that the word or word group following the first member of the pair is parallel with the word or word group following the second:

Before the Polish strikes of 1980, *both* the Hungarians *and* the Czechs tried in vain to defy Soviet authority.

His speech *not only* outraged his opponents, *but (also) cost* him the support of his own party. (*Also* is optional here.)

Near the end of the story Daniel Webster threatens to wrestle with the devil *either* on Earth *or* in hell.

In the nineteenth century, tuberculosis spared *neither* the wealthy *nor* the poor.
When two or more parts of a sentence are parallel in meaning, you should coordinate them fully by making them parallel in form. If you don’t, the faulty parallelism may jar your reader:

- The Allies decided to invade Italy and then that they would launch a massive assault on the Normandy coast.

Here are further examples:

- I like swimming, skiing, and to hike in the mountains.
- [or] I like swimming, skiing, and to hike in the mountains.
- Either we must make nuclear power safe or stop using it.
- [or] Either we must make nuclear power safe or stop using it.

In sentences made with correlatives, each correlative goes just before one of the parallel items.

- The more I see of men, I find dogs more likable.
  —Madame de Staël

- My idea of heaven is a great big baked potato, and I would like someone to share it with.
  —Oprah Winfrey

- They fought in the streets, the fields, and in the woods.

In a series of phrases beginning with a word such as to or in, repeat the word before each phrase or don’t repeat it at all after the first one (in the streets, the fields, and the woods).