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Parallel Structure Meets the Reader's Expectations

Use balanced prose to maintain the flow

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Predictability is important to a reader, just as knowing a ski trail is important to a skier. Readers and skiers are comfortable when they know what is coming and when what comes is what they expect.

Parallel construction (also called “parallel structure”) fosters predictability and meets the reader’s expectations. As explained by Wikipedia, parallel construction gives two or more parts of a sentence a similar form, imparting a definite pattern to the whole. The continuation of the pattern fulfills the reader’s expectations.

The classic example of parallel construction is the repetition of grammatical elements in a series of three. If the first two elements in the series are adjectives, the series should conclude with an adjective, not a clause, as in the following example of nonparallel construction:

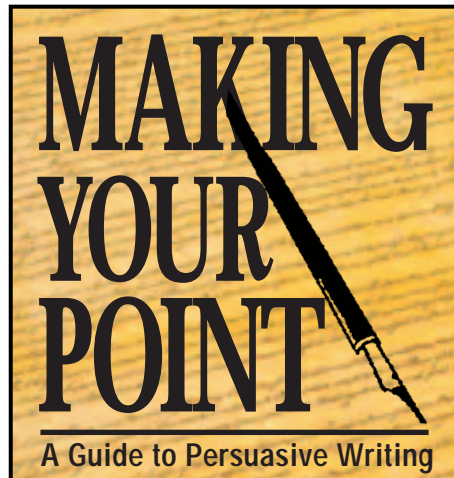
Plaintiff was lazy, sloppy and he was usually late.

Fix the sentence by removing “he was,” leaving three adjectives in a row:

Plaintiff was lazy, sloppy and usually late.

Modifying the third adjective (“late”) with an adverb (“usually”)

doesn’t disturb the parallel construction because readers instinctively know that adverbs modify adjectives. Consequently, readers aren’t surprised by an adverb even though they are wait-



ing for an adjective. They can defer closure without discomfort.

A second way to fix the above sentence is to eliminate the series of three by placing “and” between “lazy and sloppy”:

Plaintiff was lazy and sloppy, and he was usually late.

The “and” between lazy and sloppy signals that a series of two has concluded, so the reader won’t look for a third adjective and will be comfortable with

the concluding clause.

Another way to achieve parallel construction is to repeat different grammatical elements in the same order, which the following example fails to do:

E-mail communications can be easily deleted — either by employees manually or automatically by the computer.

“Either ... or” bracketing “by employees manually” prepares the reader to receive another sequence consisting of verb (“deleted”), prepositional phrase (“by employees”), and adverb (“manually”). Instead, the sentence supplies a sequence in which the verb (“deleted”) is immediately followed by an adverb (“automatically”), and only then by the prepositional phrase (“by the computer”). The sentence is particularly awkward because of the inherently confusing, fortuitous dichotomy of “manually or automatically.” (How would an employee — as opposed to a machine — do something “automatically”?) Because of these flaws in the sentence, the flow is disrupted, the reader’s expectations are disappointed, and the reader has to do extra work.

To meet the reader’s expectations, reverse the order of “computer” and “automatically”:

E-mail communications can be easily deleted — either by employees manually or by the computer automatically.

Incidentally — would you reverse “be” and “easily”? The sentence would

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then read as follows:

E-mail communications can easily be deleted — either by employees manually or by the computer automatically.

Several members of my informal polling group would not adopt the alternative construction — “can easily be deleted.” They prefer the original formulation, “can be easily deleted.” To one of them, “It sounds better.” Other members of the group, not wanting to “split the verb” (“can be deleted”), would put “easily” last, as in “can be deleted easily.”

Maybe it’s a matter of taste, but the formulation that makes the most sense to me is “can easily be deleted” (as in “he can easily be convinced”), suggesting that e-mails can readily disappear, creating discovery issues. I don’t see that the mechanics of deletion as addressed by the other two options (“can be deleted easily” or “can be easily deleted”) are worth discussing.

Yet another way to be predictable by following a pattern is to set forth concepts in the same order as the words that invoke them. For example, in the following sentence, the triggering words are “negligent” and “intentional,” and the triggered concepts are loss and destruction:

Immediate action is required to prevent spoliation — the negligent or intentional destruction or loss of relevant evidence.

Evidence can be lost or destroyed (“spoliated”) through negligent or intentional action or inaction. Because the sentence mentions negligence before intentionality, the words that are most closely associated with the consequences of negligence and intentionality, respectively, i.e., “loss” and “destruction,” should appear in that order — first loss, suggesting negligence, then destruction, which can suggest negligence but more heavily connotes intentionality.

If you say that something can be done negligently or intentionally, the reader will look first for the consequences of negligence and then for the consequences of intentionality. This is why you should say “loss or destruction” in the above example rather than “destruction or loss” — to meet the reader’s expectations.

Edits like this are subtle. Negligence can result not only in “loss” but also in (accidental) “destruction.” The consequences of intentionality, on the other hand, are more likely to be characterized as “destruction.” One does not intentionally lose evidence, given that loss is associated with inadvertence. One could say, “He purposely ‘lost’ the evidence,” but the meaning would be ironic, and “lost” would require quotation marks.

Puzzler

How would you fix the following sentence?

The defendants denied the allegations of the complaint and that

injunctive relief was appropriate, and requested that the matter be deferred to an arbitrator.

The sentence lacks parallel structure — similar elements in similar positions. “Allegations” is a noun, and “that injunctive relief was appropriate” is a noun clause — a different grammatical structure. Both are objects of the verb “denied.”

One way to achieve parallel structure is to repeat the verb “denied.” The three verbs (two “denieds” and a “requested”) then become the parallel elements:

The defendants denied the allegations of the complaint, denied that injunctive relief was appropriate, and requested that the matter be deferred to an arbitrator.

You can tighten the sentence by saying that the defendants “opposed” injunctive relief (a shorter and more active construction) and by substituting “arbitration” for the long phrase, “that the matter be deferred to an arbitrator.”

The comma after “relief” is optional. I add it to emphasize the defendants’ opposition to injunctive relief.

The revised version:

The defendants denied the allegations of the complaint, opposed injunctive relief, and requested arbitration. ■