

Good Writing Practice

Syntactic dissonance and impeded immediate comprehension Coordination nonparallelism

SECTION EDITORS



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Introduction

Coordination nonparallelism is the lack of structural symmetry between coordinated sentence constituents that are intended to be equivalent in importance. A classic example of such nonparallelism is “I love fishing, swimming, and to run.”

In this article, examples of nonparallel coordination are adverb and adverbial (Part 1); noun and nominal, noun and noun phrase (Part 2); verb type (linking and intransitive or transitive; Part 3); and verb voice (active and passive; Part 4).

Part 1 – Adverb and adverbial

Example: ‘reversibly’ and ‘specifically’

This example is from an introduction section: experimental approach.

This technique depends on biological molecules binding to other molecules reversibly and with high specificity.

A nonparallelism exists between coordination of the adverb *reversibly* with an adverbial prepositional phrase *with high specificity*. In the revision, the adverbial prepositional phrase *with high specificity* is transformed into the adverb *specifically* to be parallel with *reversibly*.

This technique depends on biological molecules binding to other molecules reversibly and specifically.

Notes

- Nonparallelism between an adverb and an adverbial (a syntactic unit that functions adverbially) is a minor distraction of dissonance. However, when comparing a nonparallel example to a parallel revision in a principle-testing option exercise, most students select the revision.



- Identification and revision of nonparallelism is often at the superficial level, simply identifying and revising the nonparallel structure of the coordinated unit. However, deeper insight into information meaning may elicit another pattern (not coordination) to more effectively match structure and rhetorical intent of the information. An evolution from coordination to another syntactic pattern is not unexpected because coordination is one of the first stages of syntactic fluency development.
- The abundant amount of detail in research writing is amenable to coordination during which nonparallelism occurs between core sentence constituents (e.g., nouns, verbs) and between non-core constituents (e.g., modifiers). For most instances of non-parallelism, the rhetorical consequence is dissonance. In *I love fishing, swimming, and to run*, there is no impeded comprehension because all are sporting activities.

Part 2 – Noun and nominal

Example: ‘epidemics and the eating of dinosaur eggs by early mammals’

This example is from an Introduction

section: hypothesis.

Epidemics and the eating of dinosaur eggs by early mammals were two possible causes for dinosaur extinction.

Nonparallelism between a noun and nominal (a syntactic unit that functions as a noun) may be a more serious distraction than the nonparallelism between an adverb and adverbial, possibly because nouns are core constituents of sentences, functioning as subjects, direct objects, and subject complements. In the example, *epidemics* the noun is nonparallel to *eating of dinosaur eggs by early mammals*. There are two suggested revisions; in the first, the second coordinated constituent is replaced by *mammalian-oophagy* a structure parallel to that of *epidemics*.

Epidemics and mammalian-oophagy were two possible causes for dinosaur extinction.

In the second suggested revision, the coordination is eliminated by transforming (e.g., de-coordinating) the noun *epidemics* into the object of the phrasal preposition *in addition to*. By such de-coordination, the necessity for parallel structure is eliminated, and the resulting pattern may better express the interrelation of information. However,

by such de-coordination, *epidemics* is deemphasised as if it is the more understood of the causes, so that *the eating of dinosaur eggs by early mammals* is the focus of the hypothesis.

In addition to epidemics, a second possible cause for dinosaur extinction was the eating of dinosaur eggs by early mammals.

Part 3 – Linking verb and intransitive verb and transitive verb

Example 1: 'is' and 'decreases'

This example is from an Introduction section: research problem context.

*Lysine **is** an abundant muscle constituent, and **decreases** in amount during starvation.*

The most common nonparallelism in research writing occurs between coordinated verbs that differ in type (linking, transitive, intransitive). Revision often involves transformation into another syntactic pattern. In the Example, by the apparent equivalency of structure, the descriptive clause is over-emphasised and as a result, the assertive clause is deemphasised. In the Revision, embedding the descriptive information as an appositive to the subject deemphasises the descriptive information and, concomitantly, emphasises the assertion. The syntactic reduction of the independent clause into the appositive *an abundant muscle constituent* enables the de-coordination.

Lysine, an abundant muscle constituent, decreases in amount during starvation.

Note

- a. The coordination of nonparallel verbs often is mistakenly marked with a comma, but this ostensible apology for the nonparallelism and non-equivalency is itself distracting, because the comma disrupts the coordination.

Example 2: 'was' and 'had'

This example is from a Results section: data-based observation.

*Spot no. 1 **was** the most acidic and **had** the highest apparent molecular weight.*

Neither verb is emphasised in the Example because coordination renders them equivalent. However, the nonparallel verb type is a cue that the relation is non-equivalent. The linking verb *was* usually marks the less important descriptive information compared to the assertive information marked by



the transitive verb *had*. In the first suggested revision, the information marked by the linking verb is transformationally deemphasised into a reduced adjectival phrase in apposition.

*Spot no. 1, **the most acidic**, had the highest apparent molecular weight.*

In an alternative revision, the properties are listed because they are seemingly independent of each other and of equivalent importance.

The properties of spot no. 1 were as follows: most acidic; highest apparent molecular weight.

Part 4 – Active and passive voice verbs

Example: 'are performed' and 'depend'

This example is from an Introduction section: research problem justification.

Traditional dose studies are performed at a pollutant concentration much higher than that observed in situ and depend on mortality as a final criterion.

The nonparallelism resulting from coordination of the passive voice 'are performed' and the active voice verb 'depend' is a cue that an alternative syntactic structure (involving de-coordination) would be better matched to rhetorical intent. In the first revision, the verb phrase *are performed* is attenuated into the past participle *performed*.

*Traditional dose studies, **performed** at a pollutant concentration much higher than that observed in situ, **depend** on mortality as a final criterion.*

In a second revision, *depend on mortality as a final criterion* is deemphasised as a present participial phrase *depending on mortality as*

a final criterion.

*Traditional dose studies, **depending on mortality as a final criterion**, are performed at a pollutant concentration much higher than that observed in situ.*

Selection of the first or second revision may depend on emphasis; that is, which information is intended to be emphasised. In both revisions, the phrase with the finite verb 'depend' (first revision) and 'are performed' (second revision) receives the emphasis, whereas the phrase functioning as a modifier is deemphasised.

Another determinant for selecting the first or second revision is the length of the modifying phrase initiated by 'performed' or 'depending'. Both intervene between the subject and verb of the sentence, the first by 12 words and the second by 7 words. Thus, based on the length of the disruptive phrase, the second revision may be the selection.

In a third revision, *depending on mortality as a final criterion* is placed before the subject *traditional dose studies* to avoid disruption between subject and verb.

***Depending on mortality as a final criterion**, traditional dose studies are performed at a pollutant concentration much higher than that observed in situ.*

Summary

Nonparallelism consists of two general types: 1. between equivalent or 2. between nonequivalent coordinated syntactic units. The nonparallelism between equivalent units is a dissonance, which can be revised by transforming the nonparallel into a parallel unit (See Part 1, Adverb and Adverbial; Part 2, Noun and Nominal).

The nonparallelism between nonequivalent units is impeded immediate comprehension, which can be revised syntactically by de-coordination. De-coordination involves transforming the less important unit into a lesser syntactic structure so that the other coordinated unit is emphasised. Thus, the nonparallelism is a cue that the units are not intended to be viewed as of equivalent importance (See Part 3: Nonparallel verb type and Part 4: Nonparallel verb voice).

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