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THE **FOURTH** IN A SERIES OF EXERCISES ON SENTENCE FLUENCY

# NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES

BY DAVID PATES

## PARALLELISM: THE ART OF POWERFUL COPY

As emphasized in Parts 1-3 of this series, writers of journalistic stories are responsible for shaping order to story details through vocabulary and grammatical sentence structures that not only keep readers interested in the details but also present an objective interpretation of the “truth” captured in the story. To manage multiple details in journalistic writing, perceptive writers also employ parallelism as a useful sentence-style tool.

Writers recognize that readers accept apparent complexity arising from layers of factual detail or multiple points of view when the article presents ideas and information in grammatically parallel sequences. The fancy words — grammatically parallel sequences — suggest a repetitive flow utilizing gerund phrases, participial phrases, prepositional phrases, adjective-noun groups and subject-verb constructions. Those constructions create parallelism to express details. Writers and editors make these constructions happen so that it is easier for readers to understand the connections and the perspective.

The process requires that writers and editors consider these questions:

- Is all information reported in news stories “equal”?
- What “holds” readers once they begin reading copy: Names of people (who)? Actions of the story (what)? Times (when) and places (where)? Causes and results (why)?

### PARALLELISM: A SKILL TO IMPROVE

All journalists can improve both their writing and their speaking prowess by using parallelism because structuring language with parallel style immediately makes it easy to organize opinions and facts, such as places, actions and descriptions. First, writers sense the connections. Then they develop the ability to use similar language forms that empower their writing as they realize that parallelism requires using words that repeat the grammatical form.

**Count the ways. Consider the examples. Add your own examples.**

**Participles/Gerunds (verb plus “ing”):**

running, passing, blocking

**Prepositional Phrases:**

in the classes, in the gymnasium, in the hallways  
by discussions, by group projects, by lab experiences  
from parents, from faculty, from students

**Adjective-Noun groups:**

capable actor, imaginative director, creative set designer

**Subject-Verb constructions:**

The switch broke. The furnace quit. The table collapsed.

In addition to carefully crafted words, uniform punctuation can accentuate parallel information. Sometimes periods separate a series of short sentences. Often a comma-semicolon pattern makes it easy to present information with fewer words and in an easy-to-understand manner.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS: Danielle LaTour, senior class treasurer; Robert Hilford, Ecology Club president; Jon Jordan, band president

TASTE ENHANCEMENTS: rosemary, a culinary herb; ginger, a fragrant spice; horseradish, a pungent root

# NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

## EXERCISE 1: ANALYSIS OF SENTENCE CHOICES

### PART 1: OBSERVING GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE OF PARALLEL STYLE

**DIRECTIONS:** First, analyze the intentionally altered, wordy version of the three published sentences and reconstruct into one effective sentence by employing parallel words or phrases. Then compare your version with the published piece and identify the grammatical role of the parallel construction (i.e., direct object, adjective, adverb, etc.).

As a class, discuss the effect of connecting concepts as grammatically parallel ideas instead of isolating them as single-sentence topics. Encourage students to find and explain the grammatical elements that are parallel in each original sentence. After students suggest similar grammatical elements, show the class the published version and explain the grammatical elements.

Challenge them to improve their awareness as they proceed to sentences 2 and 3. Repeat the method above, but encourage more explanations from the class.

**SOURCE:** *Chicago Tribune*, Monday, Dec. 21, 2009. Commentary (sic), by Charles Krauthammer, "An anniversary of sorts," p. 40.

1. Referencing the demise of the Soviet Union as a significant event during the last quarter century:

After 60 years, the Soviet Union died. The deeply evil empire had collapsed. The most perverse political idea in history was dead.

2. Referencing "the most exhilarating time of all" since 9/11:

Barack Obama came to office with some bracing agendas that would alter power. For instance, he is a very serious man. He also presents a very determined and challenging ideology, which is good for democracy.

3. Referencing opposition to Obama proposals:

The '90s were enervating; the 2000s were tragic. Prospects for the 2010s being combative and clarifying is politically energizing. The idea of radically opposed visions is intellectually invigorating.

### PART 2: OBSERVING SUBTLETIES OF PARALLEL STYLE

**DIRECTIONS:** Construct one sentence from the three statements below. Use "with" as the parallel signal to connect actions. Some verb forms will need to be changed.

**SOURCE:** *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan 18, 2010, by Tim Cowlshaw, *Dallas Morning News*. "Dallas has far to go."

4. Referencing The Dallas Cowboys' loss to the Minnesota Vikings, 34-3, on Jan. 17, 2010.

- The Cowboys played as if they were unaware that the Vikings led the NFL in sacks.
- Romo was stationary in the pocket for long stretches.
- Tight end Jason Witten tried to block all-pro defensive end Jared Allen on the key play of the game.
- The performance of Felix Jones was inexplicably dissatisfying.

# NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

## ANSWERS TO EXERCISE 1: ANALYSIS OF SENTENCE CHOICES

*Published original: Sentence 1*

- It marked the end of 60 years of existential conflict, the collapse of a deeply evil empire and the death of one of the most perverse political ideas in history.

*Grammatical analysis:* Direct object + prep. phrase.

It marked [**the end of 60 years of existential conflict**], **the collapse of a deeply evil empire**, and [**the death of one of the most perverse political ideas in history**].

*Published original: Sentence 2*

- There is nothing as bracing for democracy as the alternation of power, particularly when it yields as serious, determined and challenging an ideological agenda as Barack Obama's.

*Grammatical analysis:* adjectives "pre-modifying" the noun agenda.

There is nothing as bracing for democracy as the alternation of power, particularly when it yields as [**serious**], [**determined**] and [**challenging**] an ideological agenda as Barack Obama's.

*Published original: Sentence 3*

- But after the enervating '90s and the tragic 2000s, the prospect of combative and clarifying 2010s, of sharply defined and radically opposed visions, is both politically and intellectually invigorating.

*Grammatical analysis:*

But after <sup>a</sup>[the enervating '90s] and <sup>a</sup>[the tragic 2000s], the prospect <sup>b</sup>[of combative and clarifying 2010s], <sup>b</sup>[of sharply defined and radically opposed visions], is both <sup>c</sup>[politically] and <sup>c</sup>[intellectually] invigorating.

<sup>a</sup> = adverbial noun phrases (defining "when")

<sup>b</sup> = prepositional phrases (begin with "of") to complement the noun *prospect*;

<sup>c</sup> = -ly adverbs modifying invigorating.

*Published original: Sentence 4 (sports story)*

- The Cowboys played as (as though) they were unaware that the Vikings led the NFL in sacks, with Romo stationary in the pocket for long stretches, with tight end Jason Witten trying to block all-pro defensive end Jared Allen on the key play of the game and with an inexplicable dissatisfaction in the performance of Felix Jones.

*Grammatical analysis:* prepositional phrases + noun (2 proper nouns, 1 common noun) + modifying phrase.

The Cowboys played (as though) they were unaware that the Vikings led the NFL in sacks, [**with Romo stationary** in the pocket for long stretches], [**with tight end Jason Witten trying to block** all-pro defensive end Jared Allen on the key play of the game] and [**with an inexplicable dissatisfaction** in the performance of Felix Jones].

DISCUSS why the writer changes the third example connected by "with."

Note that the object of the preposition in the third parallel element is not a player's name. Instead, the writer uses a conceptual noun: dissatisfaction [Felix Jones would parallel the two names used in the previous two prepositional phrases]. What emphasis does the writer achieve with this strategy? What are the advantages of the subtle change? How does the change keep the readers on track without insulting them?

# NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

## EXERCISE 2: PARALLELISM IN SPEECHES

### ANALYZING SPEECHES

Provide students with copies of the speeches for Part 1 and Part 2. Let them work independently on identifying the parallelism. Then discuss the questions for each — either as a class or in small groups.

Historical records provide examples of memorable speeches that show the power of parallelism. They are a good source to help writers to discover helpful examples. As a result, students can become more aware of ways to improve their copy and to edit or tutor other staff members.

#### Part 1

Study the quote from President John F. Kennedy's "Cuba Speech," delivered at a Democratic dinner in Cincinnati (Oct. 6, 1960). Then underline the prepositional phrases that unify the examples with parallel structure. Prepare to discuss these questions:

- How many do you find?
- What is the grammatical structure?
- Why is it effective?
- How do the prepositional phrases make it easy to comprehend complex details?
- How do they make it easy to deliver the information in a speech?

#### Excerpt from the speech:

*Exploiting the twin themes of human misery and Yankee hatred, Castro's campaign has met with success in almost every country — in Brazil, where both presidential candidates found it politically expedient to appeal to pro-Castro and anti-American elements in the electorate — in Mexico, where anti-American riots followed pressure on a pro-Castro spokesman — in Guatemala, where Castro-equipped revolutionaries are a real menace — in Uruguay, where a general strike was threatened if Castro was not supported at the San Jose conference.*

#### Part 2

Study a speech in Congress (Jan. 10, 1918) on Women's Rights and Wartime Service by Rep. Jeannette Rankin, a Republican from Montana and the first American woman elected to Congress (Nov. 6, 1916). Underline the numerous ways she expresses her ideas with parallelism. Prepare to discuss these questions:

- What words or phrases does she repeat to emphasize a parallel emphasis?
- How many different parallel constructions does she use? (Name grammatical forms.)
- How does she contrast functions of men and of women?
- How does she change the mood from facts to potential?
- How effective would her parallelism be when speaking to a modern audience?

*We have men — men for the army, for the navy, for the air; men for the industries, the mines, the fields; men for the government. And national leaders are now reaching out and drawing men of talent, picking those with the best minds, with expert knowledge and with broad perspective to aid in war work.*

*But something is still lacking in the completeness of our national effort. ...*

*Might it not be that men who have spent their lives thinking in terms of commercial profit find it hard to adjust themselves to thinking in terms of human needs?*

*Might it not be that a great force (that) has always been thinking in terms of human needs and that always will think in terms of human needs has not been mobilized? ...*

*It would be strange indeed if the women of this country, through all these years, had not developed an intelligence, a feeling, a spiritual force to themselves, which they hold in readiness to give the world. It would be strange indeed if the influence of women through direct participation in the political struggles, through which all social and development proceeds, would not lend a certain virility, a certain influx of new strength and understanding and sympathy and ability to the exhausting effort we are now making.*

# NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

## ANSWERS TO EXERCISE 2: PARALLELISM IN SPEECHES

### Part 1: Kennedy speech

*Grammatical analysis:* prepositional phrase (in . . .) + where + adverbial detail, referring back to “in almost every country.”

Exploiting the twin themes of human misery and Yankee hatred, Castro’s campaign has met with success in almost every country – [in Brazil], where both presidential candidates found it politically expedient to appeal to pro-Castro and anti-American elements in the electorate – [in Mexico], where anti-American riots followed pressure on a pro-Castro spokesman – [in Guatemala], where Castro-equipped revolutionaries are a real menace – [in Uruguay], where a general strike was threatened if Castro was not supported at the San Jose conference.

### Part 2: Rankin Speech

Rankin “piles up” vivid, multiple images associated with both nouns and verbs. She repeats the direct object **men** three times and adds **for** prepositional phrases (four of them) to define critical areas of national service. She defines the required talents using three **with** prepositional phrases referring to ‘those’. Two action verbs, **spent** and (to) **adjust** are modified with **-ing** adverbial gerund phrases. The “**in terms of**” phrase is repeated for strong emphasis on the type of thinking that “a great force” employs.

To add strong emphasis to the role of women as part of this “great force,” she inserts three direct objects modifying “had (not) developed.” She understands the variety that “through” lends. In one case it functions as an adjectival prepositional phrase modifying a noun (influence), and in another case it functions as a reflexive (which) adjectival modifier of a noun in the main clause. The passage concludes with a pair of parallel noun phrases, the first pair direct objects of the verb and the second pair objects of the preposition **of**.

We have men — [men] for the army, for the navy, for the air; [men] for the industries, the mines, the fields; [men] for the government. And national leaders are now reaching out and drawing men of talent, picking [those] with the best minds, with expert knowledge and with broad perspective to aid in war work.

But something is still lacking in the completeness of our national effort. . . .

Might it not be that men who have [spent] their lives thinking in terms of commercial profit find it hard [to adjust] themselves [to] thinking in terms of human needs?

Might it not be that a great force that [has always been thinking] in terms of human needs and that [always will think] in terms of human needs has not been mobilized? . . .

It would be strange indeed if the women of this country, through all these years, [had not developed] intelligence, a feeling, a spiritual force to themselves, which they hold in readiness to give the world.

It would be strange indeed if the influence of women [through] direct participation in the political struggles, [through which] all social and development proceeds, [would not lend] a certain virility, a certain influx [of] new strength and understanding and sympathy and ability to the exhausting effort we are now making.

# NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

## PARALLELISM IN SPORTS WRITING

Mike Lopresti, in a Gannett sports column (Jan. 4, 2010), uses parallelism as transitions to additional ideas about quarterback Terrelle Pryor. Notice that Lopresti first uses parallelism as brief one-sentence transitions to new perspectives. How does he change the final three-word sentence? What does that change signal?

In the second example, he highlights the parallel structure by using bullets, another device to connect similar ideas. What changes in the first three words after the bullet? What makes the sentences effective?

In another column (Jan. 25, 2010), Lopresti uses parallelism to highlight strengths of an individual — strengths he connects to the playoff game against the New York Jets.

After students have read the examples, help students recognize that the writer uses short words and changes the verbs (say, enjoy and can do). Also, he signals the end by beginning the last bullet item with “Or.” In the second column, they should note the power of repeating the name Peyton with three precise descriptions.

### Column 1: Reaction to Ohio State’s Rose Bowl conquest of Oregon

*Which brings us to this New Year’s resolution of Terrelle Pryor: “We’ve just got to keep on winning.”*

*Now that we know Ohio State’s plans for 2010 — pushed by the tailwinds from the Rose Bowl spanking of Oregon — this might be a good time to take a long look at the Buckeyes’ quarterback and pose a question.*

*Does he remind anyone of Vince Young?*

*Young’s dual threat firepower began to blossom his sophomore season, fertilized by enough experience and hard knocks.*

**Just like Pryor.**

*Young’s promotion to a new level — from potential star to fully functioning playmaker — was announced in the Rose Bowl when he passed and ran an opponent into oblivion.*

**Just like Pryor.**

*Young returned to his junior season with a gaggle of other starters, guaranteeing his team would be one of the hunted in the polls before the first pep song from the tuba section.*

**So will Pryor.**

*Young won the national championship as a Texas junior. See where we’re headed with this?*

*You can do three good things in a bowl game besides simply winning it.*

- **You can say a proper goodbye.** *See Tim Tebow and Bobby Bowden. Poor Cincinnati and West Virginia. They thought they were being invited to play in a bowl game when they were really being asked to serve as shrimp cocktail for two farewell parties.*
- **You can enjoy the moment** *by ignoring caution, prudence and conventional wisdom and turn the entire game into something like one long Hail Mary pass.*
- **Or, you can do something** *that suggests the future could be yours. Ohio State, for instance.*

### Column 2: Description of a quarterback’s accomplishments

*The first bad sign for the New York Jets came at the coin toss. The referee called them the “New York Giants.”*

*But the next was an infinitely worse sign. Here for the Indianapolis Colts came No. 18. Nobody gets his name wrong.*

**Peyton the Technician.**

**Peyton the Problem Solver.**

**Peyton the Quarterback** — *in virtually every definition attached to that word, climbing up the list of the all-time greats with another tour de force to push him ever higher.*

*(From that set-up it is easy to imagine the descriptive action/documentation that followed.)*

# NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

## EXERCISE 3: PARALLELISM IN SPORTS WRITING

After students have discussed the column examples, they need to show their own talents. First, though, prepare for the writing assignment.

Ahead of time, assign sports editors and writers to prepare three lists of similar facts that everyone can use to develop parallel writing skills. The more lists they gather, the more success your staff will have. Make copies or send a computer list file so all students can use the information to gain confidence in making parallelism a strength of their writing.

Require each student to develop a comparison of sports personal or facilities — for diverse school teams, for facilities in your school's league or for community sports.

### Part 1:

Imitate the styles used by the Gannett sports columnist by connecting ideas about local sports in your school or community. Try two of three ways:

- the repetition and slight twist of a statement, similar to the “Just Like Pryor” usage,
- short sentences suggested possibilities and introduced with bullets,
- repetition of name with precise descriptions.

### Part 2:

Divide students into teams of four. Appoint sports editors or editors of other departments as leaders. Have them work together to polish the original creations of each student. Then allow about 10-15 minutes so the groups may read their best examples to the class.



# NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

## EXERCISE 4: PARALLELISM IN FEATURE PERSPECTIVES

Well-written publications — newspapers, magazines or yearbooks — add perspective by connecting anecdotes with parallelism to illustrate an overall concept. Broadcasts have a similar need. Those students, whether writing a script or responding candidly to news/sports events, need to be equally skilled in the use of parallelism.

### Part 1

Your editor has assigned you to write a story showing the variety of student services your high school provides. After a week of reporting, you have collected the following information:

- Rual Patel, junior, went to the nurse's office three times. She gave him three adhesive bandages to use for cuts on his wrist. The cuts happened during early morning basketball practice. After school the nurse wrapped his wrist with a bandage.
- A scholarship for college — that's what senior Giselle Martine needs. Her counselor called her to the guidance office. He gave her two applications for French-speaking students who live in their county. Martin responded, "I need special help because the deadline for both scholarships is this month."
- Gantt Livingston's parents were not happy when they were informed via a progress report that said he was failing algebra. Immediately his mother called the teacher to find out how to help her son. By the end of the week, the sophomore was reporting to the Study Center for special tutoring during his study hall period.
- Advanced editing/Anecdote 4: Talk to teachers, counselors and classmates about other services your school provides. Find an individual who has benefited from the service. Include the information in parallel style in your story.

Include all the pertinent details you found in each situation. Determine the parallel emphasis you want to develop in this informational feature brief. Consider the possibilities:

1. Individuals needing help.
2. Places (office or center) providing help.
3. Kind of help students received.
4. Problems requiring solutions.

Then write a story using parallel structure to illustrate the concept of school services. Minimum length: four paragraphs (lead and content). Maximum length (for advanced editing option): six paragraphs (lead, content and tie-back paragraph).

### Part 2

Collect the papers at the end of the period. The next day assign groups of four or five that represent various levels of duty and experience. Instruct the groups to evaluate the effectiveness of the parallelism. Then list strengths and suggestions for improvement. In addition, encourage groups to check original sentences that they believe use parallelism especially well.

# NEWSWORTHY SENTENCES EXERCISE

## EXERCISE 5: DEVELOPING PARALLELISM SKILLS

### Parallelism: A Key to Communication

Recognition of parallelism as the conveyor of powerful ideas marks journalists as effective, insightful communicators. Artistic writers in all genres, whether producing fiction or nonfiction, employ it. Successful politicians rely on it to help readers and listeners comprehend ideas. Articulate athletes use it to express strategy and emotions. Student writers utilize it to connect details and similarities.

Parallelism signals an effective writing style in all media communication — publications, broadcast, academic papers — as well as in informal communication. It becomes the standard as novice writers, experienced editors and all staff members collaborate to create clear copy that is packed with gripping detail through parallelism. As a result, students learn to use parallelism to achieve fluency.

### Part 1: Collecting Examples

Challenge your students/staffs to collect current examples of parallelism. Tell them to bring five clips — either from newspapers or from magazines. To make their examples more helpful, they should highlight key words or phrases so that it is easy to recognize the parallelism.

To make the search more fun, you may want to set up group challenges, such as the ones listed below.

1. Gift to editors — from reporters or photographers.
2. Gift to writers — from editors or business staff
3. Gift to leaders — from novices
4. Gift to the other staff — from yearbook to newspaper, etc.
5. Gift to print staffs — from broadcasters

### Part 2: Using Parallelism

Now comes the ultimate test: developing parallelism in new copy. Involve students in this goal by suggesting topics that lend themselves to humor. List these topics or others of your choice:

1. A Utopian high school
2. The perfect son or daughter
3. The eco-friendly family

Assign students to write two- or three-paragraph opinion pieces to convince others that their idea is best. Encourage them to apply creative imagination that fits the topic. The goal: to present and sustain ideas with parallelism.