

# Effective Rhetoric, Effective Writing: Parallelism in Technical Communication

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When two or more concepts are logically equal, the same grammatical structure can be repeated to improve writing style and readability, for example, “Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.” (1). In grammar and rhetoric, we speak of parallelism, and this technique lends itself to technical communication.

## What is rhetoric?

**classical rhetoric serves the  
pursuit of knowledge**

In ancient Greece, rhetoric evolved as an art used by public speakers to persuade an audience of the correctness of their arguments. Around 600 BC, a school of philosophers known as the Sophists travelled from town to town, giving speeches and staging debates in the name of education. However, it was often thought that the Sophists would counter any argument with an opposing argument by using false rhetoric to make poor arguments seem better. Other classical philosophers believed that language should be used not to obscure, but to discover truths, that is, to create knowledge through communication.

**modern professions use  
rhetoric to present  
information effectively**

Today, forms of rhetoric used in advertising and mass media such as television and the Internet are often inflammatory and empty. Politicians are notorious for their use of eloquent yet false rhetoric. However, classical rhetoric provides an effective means of ordering, clarifying, and emphasizing information in many professions, such as public relations, lobbying, law, marketing, and technical communication. Practitioners of rhetoric use techniques such as alliteration, metaphor, and simile to make listeners or readers receptive to information. Technical documentation frequently uses parallelism.

## What is parallelism?

**unbalanced sentences are  
awkward and wordy**

The following definition of the term information is awkward and wordy.

- “Information is knowledge obtained from investigation, by studying, or has been instructed.”

There is no use of parallelism, and part of the sentence needs to be repeated to identify the following items:

- obtained from investigation
- obtained by studying
- [that] has been instructed

These items contain unlike grammatical elements and do not share a common verb and preposition, as shown in the following:

- verb + preposition + noun
- verb + preposition + verb
- [determiner] + verb + verb + verb

The third item is grammatically incorrect because a determiner (that) is missing. The

**balanced sentences are clear and concise**

sentence does not adhere to a pattern and is difficult to understand.

The following definition of the term information is clear and concise.

- “Information is knowledge obtained from investigation, study, or instruction.”(2)

The most immediate and apparent use of rhetoric is the tri-fold parallelism of the following items:

- investigation
- study
- instruction

These items are grammatically equal and share a common verb, as shown in the following:

- noun
- noun
- noun

The sentence follows a pattern and is easy to understand.

### **Why practice parallel writing?**

**parallel structures make complex sentences more readable**

The definition of the term information displays a parallel structure with nouns.

Parallel structures used with adjectives, adverbs, phrases, or clauses make even long and complex sentences easier to read.

**parallel steps make procedures easy to follow**

Parallelism is also effective in numbered lists, such as the following procedure:

1. On the “File” menu, click “New”.
2. Under “New Document”, click “New E-Mail Message”.
3. In the “To” and “Cc” fields, enter the names of the recipients.
4. In the “Subject” field, enter the subject of the message.
5. In the text area, type your message.
6. Click “Send”.

Each step uses the imperative form of the verb (1. click, 2. click, 3. enter, 4. enter, 5. type, 6. click). Parallel structures used in list items, including items in bullet lists and entries in glossaries, indexes and tables, make information easier to identify.

**consistent headings create symmetry and structure**

Headings summarize the contents of a topic or piece of text and label different types of information, such as a procedure, a process or a description of a product, a function or a concept. For example, a procedure has the heading “Sending an E-Mail Message”. Other procedures related to e-mail messages have the following headings:

- Replying to an E-Mail Message
- Forwarding an E-Mail Message
- Recalling an E-Mail Message

Each heading uses the -ing form of the verb (replying to, forwarding, recalling) and a singular noun. Parallel structures used in headings and labels, including image captions, diagram legends, and even terms on graphical user interfaces, create

symmetry and structure.

### **Why create parallel documentation?**

#### **typography emphasizes text function**

In writing professions, the words themselves are important, but design also supports text function. The use of a document template, which defines formats and styles for different information types, ensures consistent look and feel. For example, the use of a particular text size, font, and color, such as Arial, 11 pt, dark blue, for all procedure headings (and only for procedure headings) combined with the use of a parallel structure, such as verb + -ing, promotes clarity.

#### **parallel writing supports content reuse**

Modular documentation strategies such as single-source publishing aim to reduce text redundancy and enable content reuse. Phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or entire topics are created with reuse in mind, for example, in different manuals or for different media. Therefore, text must also be suitable for use in non-linear documentation such as online Help. Parallel writing ensures that text remains consistent and that the documentation does not become disorderly when text is removed, inserted, or rearranged.

#### **consistency is translation-friendly**

Parallel writing promotes the use of standard grammar and word order. Although different languages display different grammatical patterns, both human and machine translation benefit from compliance with standards and conventions. The source text is easier to understand, which makes it easier to achieve an accurate translation in the target languages. Furthermore, parallel writing produces text that is more consistent, concise, and repetitive than text that lacks parallelism. The translation of parallel text therefore requires less time and effort.

### **Summary**

Parallel writing is used to:

- Group, structure, and balance information of the same or similar type
- Emphasize the meaning and likeness of information
- Improve readability through structure, repetition, and rhythm

Although parallelism is just one aspect of writing, it can have remarkably positive effects on technical documentation, including design, content reuse, and translation. In short: one small step for technical writing, one great leap for technical communication (3).

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References:

1. Joseph Addison
2. Definition 2 a (1) from Merriam-Webster, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/information>
3. A play on “One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” – one of the most famous uses of contrasting ideas in a parallel structure (also known as antithesis)

Further reading:

Gideon O. Burton, Brigham Young University, “Silva Rhetoricae”,  
<http://rhetoric.byu.edu/>

Andrew R. Cline Ph.D., Missouri State University, “Rhetorica: A Rhetoric Primer”,  
<http://rhetorica.net/textbook/>