Parallel Structure

What is parallel structure?
Parallel structure means using the same “word pattern” for each idea in a sentence. Normally, this shows that the ideas have the same level of importance. For example: Mary likes hiking, swimming, and bicycling. Each verb is an “ing” verb, so the same “word pattern” has been used. Hiking, swimming, and bicycling all have the same level of importance. Mary likes to hike, to swim, and to ride a bicycle. Each verb is an infinitive (has “to” before it), so the same “word pattern” has been used. To hike, to swim, and to ride a bicycle all have the same importance. Mixing “word patterns” can be awkward. You should consistently use the same word pattern for all the ideas within a sentence. Mary likes hiking, swimming, and to ride a bicycle. Different “word patterns” have been used – two “ing” verbs and an infinitive. This is inconsistent, awkward, and potentially confusing.

NONPARALLEL
Students attend classes, studying, and working.

After the quarter, they are exhausted, irritable, and have learned.

PARALLEL
Students attend classes, study, and work.

After the quarter, they are exhausted, irritable, and smarter.

How to Check Your Parallel Structure
Read the sentence out loud like this:
Students attend classes.
Students studying.
Students working.

Obviously, the “ing” verbs do not sound right with the subject “students.” Parallel verbs sound better:
Students attend classes.
Students study.
Students work.

You can use this proofreading strategy for any sentence.

Parallelism with Prepositions
Some word or word patterns require that certain prepositions precede them. If the same preposition can apply to each word or word pattern, then write the preposition only before the first word/word pattern. However, the same preposition might not apply to all of the words or word patterns. Then, you will write the unique preposition for each word or word phrase.

NONPARALLEL
Students spend their time studying for better test scores, with improved essay grades, and at higher course grades.

PARALLEL
Students spend their time studying for better test scores, improved essay grades, and higher course grades.
How to Check Your Parallel Structure with Prepositions

You can read the sentence out loud like this:

Students spend their time studying **for** better test scores.
Students spend their time studying **with** improved essay grades.
Students spend their time studying **at** higher course grades.

Obviously, these prepositions do not apply to these phrases. Contrast them with this example:

Students spend their time studying **for** better test scores.
Students spend their time studying **for** improved essay grades.
Students spend their time studying **for** higher course grades.

Since the preposition “**for**” works well with each phrase, you need to write it only before the first phrase. Its existence before the other phrases is implicit or understood.

Other Proofreading Strategies

Skim your paper, pausing at the words "**and**" and "**or**." Check on each side of these words to see whether the items joined are parallel. If not, make them parallel.

If you have several items in a list, put them in a column to see if they are parallel.

Listen to the sound of the items in a list or the items being compared. Do you hear the same kinds of sounds? For example, is there a series of "**-ing**" words beginning each item? Or do your hear a rhythm being repeated? If something is breaking that rhythm or repetition of sound, check to see if it needs to be made parallel.

Practice with Parallel Structure. Choose the parallel phrase.

1. Egyptian pyramids were regularly robbed despite their intricate passageways, byzantine mazes, and _________.
   (A) walls which were false (B) they had false walls (C) false walls (D) to false walls

2. In the years following the American Revolution, Washington provided the fledgling country with keen economic insight, ________, and astute international judgment.
   (A) recognition of stability that was domestic (B) to stabilize the domestic situation (C) which was domestically stable (D) a sense of domestic stability

3. Ants can serve a garden by eliminating other bothersome insects and _________.
   (A) they can aerate the soil (B) aerating the soil (C) to aerate the soil (D) that can aerate the soil