

# WriteGuide's Letter Writing Program

## Lesson Six: *Parallel Structure*

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Have you ever seen a set of parallel lines? If you have, then you know that they travel in the exact same direction – like railroad tracks. Both tracks are identical, but they're also separate from one another.

When we talk about **parallel structure** in a piece of writing, we're talking about **words and phrases that follow the same pattern**. When a reader reads an example of **parallel structure**, he or she notices **similarities**. Writers use **parallel structure** to **draw attention to certain ideas**. If you were walking through a forest and you saw a squirrel, you might not think anything of it – but if you were walking through a forest and you saw 15 squirrels all clustered together, you'd probably begin to wonder what was going on.

**Parallel structure** works in a very similar way: **it captures the reader's attention**. What it does with the reader's attention is an entirely different matter, but we'll get to that shortly.

There are **two types of parallel structure**: the kind that involves **repeating part of a sentence**, and the kind that involves **repeating sentences in their entirety**. Let's take a look part of a sample letter that uses both.

**Dear Friend,**

**Today, as I was rooting through the cellar in search of my favorite pair of gardening gloves, I came upon an old box of ticket stubs. I used to save them when I was a boy. I saved stubs from every movie, every carnival, and every dance I ever went to. There were probably a hundred of the faded and torn tickets sitting in the bottom of the shoebox. They looked like leaves that had fallen from some exotic tree. I picked one up and tried to remember where I had gotten it. There was no way I could remember, of course – all the tickets were at least 20 or 30 years old. But there was one in particular that caught my attention. It had been red, once, but now it was a faded pink. The only red tickets I could remember were the ones from the church carnival. Years and years ago, when I was still in grade school, our church would set up a carnival in the fall. The whole family used to go together when I was very little, but then as I got older I started to go alone with my two older brothers.**

**I remember one particular year when the oldest of my two brothers, John, couldn't find his wallet. It was a very big deal for John to have a**

wallet; I guess it made him feel older. Anyway, he couldn't find it anywhere and we were supposed to have left for the carnival an hour ago. He looked under the bed. He looked in the closet. He looked behind bureaus and bookshelves. Still, he couldn't find it.

To make matters worse, Michael – my other brother – couldn't get his hair quite right. He had a comb that he kept brushing through it, and for whatever reason he couldn't get his bangs just the way he wanted them. So the two of them bustled through the house for a solid hour, complaining the entire time. Finally John found his wallet tucked into the back pocket of a pair of jeans that had gone through the wash. He was so mad he refused to speak to either of us. He just put the sopping wet wallet in his back pocket, and stormed out the front door. Then Michael got his hair right (honestly, it looked no different to me) and we followed John.

At the carnival we ate hot dogs and hamburgers and popcorn and cotton candy and caramel apples and every other kind of carnival food you can imagine. It's a miracle our teeth didn't rot and fall out of our heads. We went on rides as well. I ran into one of my friends while we were there, and since John and Michael didn't want to go on the Ferris wheel with me, my friend and I went on together. We were in fifth grade at the time. When we got to the very top I looked down and saw my two brothers staring up at us. Looking down from the very top I couldn't help but think, "*They look like tiny ants. My two big brothers look like tiny little ants. They aren't so big at all.*" I had always been in awe of my brothers. They seemed so much older than me, and so much more on top of things. But from the top of the Ferris wheel I could look down on both of them, and I knew John had a soaking-wet wallet in his back pocket, and that Michael would only move his head a certain way because the wind might wreck his hair.

When the ride was over I approached them, and silently I repeated, "*They look like tiny ants.*" From that day on the difference in our ages didn't seem so extreme.

There are two examples of **parallel structure** in the sample letter. The first can be found in the following three sentences: "**He looked under the bed. He looked in the closet. He looked behind bureaus and bookshelves.**" Notice how the phrase "**He looked**" is repeated at the very beginning of each of the sentences. The second example can be found when the writer says, "*They look like tiny ants. My two big brothers look like tiny little ants,*" and again in the last paragraph of the letter: "*They look like tiny ants.*"

As was stated earlier, the purpose of **parallel structure** is to **draw attention to something**. When John looks for his wallet, the writer repeats the words "**he looked**" over and over again (which is an example of applying parallel structure to **part of a sentence**), **emphasizing just how hard he looked**. Repeating, "**he looked**" also adds a **sense of urgency** to the description, and **makes John look upset**.

By repeating, “**They look like tiny ants,**” (an example of applying **parallel structure to a full sentence**) the writer shows us that he has **learned something important**.

Because **parallel structure** is a great way to **draw a reader’s attention to something important**, it **works particularly well with symbolism**. If you ever make use of a symbol in a piece of writing, a bit of **parallel structure can make the symbol seem even more important**. Parallel structure can also be easily **combined with direct internal dialogue** to help describe an important realization. It can be used in conjunction with **imagery** to create some very emotional, high-energy scenes. However you choose to use it, the **purpose of parallel structure is to communicate just how important a scene, an image, or a realization is**.

To use **parallel structure**, you must either have **something to describe** (like an older brother looking for his wallet), or a **sentence that describes an important realization**. If you use **direct internal dialogue**, applying **parallel structure** to a realization is a very easy thing to do – you simply **write the direct internal dialogue**, and **then repeat the same sentence at least one other time** at some other point in the piece of writing.

Using **parallel structure** to describe a scene is easy as well: all you have to do is **link together a series of actions or objects**. Sometimes it’s helpful to use the word “**and**,” as in the following examples.

Using “**and**” to create parallel structure:

- *They ran and leaped and jumped and kicked.*
- *The wind blew and howled and moaned and groaned.*

Sometimes, however, the word “**and**” isn’t necessary at all. **Parallel structure** can be created simply by **linking together a series of descriptive words, one after the other**.

Using linked descriptive words to create parallel structure:

- *Softly, gently, without any noise at all, the snow began to fall.*
- *He asked his mother, his father, and his sisters too.*
- *The stream went on its merry way, bubbling, babbling, gurgling and gushing through the forest.*

In your next letter you should include the following items:

1. **At least two examples of *imagery*.**
2. **At least three examples of *internal dialogue* (direct or indirect – it doesn’t matter which).**

3. At least one *simile* or a *metaphor*.
4. One *flashback*, or one *flashback within a flashback*.
5. One example of *direct symbolism*, *indirect symbolism*, or *subtle symbolism*.
6. At least one example of *parallel structure*.

Remember, most of these techniques are designed to overlap, so you should definitely to combine some of them.

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