Parallel Structure

We call sentence parts parallel when they have the same grammatical structure. Parallelism is often used by good writers as part of effective style:

To err is human; to forgive, divine.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.

Several situations require parallel structure.

1) Items joined by a coordinating conjunction (and, but, etc.) should be parallel. This includes items in a list.

My hobbies are painting, reading, rollerblading, and stamp collecting. (Each item in the list is the -ing forms of a verb.)

We drove to the park, had a picnic, and then came home. (Each item in the list consists of a verb and its objects or modifiers.)

I was born to poor, but honest, parents. (The two words joined by "but" are both adjectives.)

2) Structures that are connected by correlative conjunctions must be parallel. The most common correlative conjunctions are 'both . . . and', 'either . . . or', 'neither . . . nor', 'not only . . . but also'.

The headache sufferer learns not only to recognize the causes of headaches but also to control those causes.

Neither rain nor snow nor dark of night will keep us from our appointed rounds.

3) Items that are being compared or contrasted should be parallel.

I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.

A bad day spent fishing is better than a good day spent working.
Practice

Find the flaws in parallelism in the following sentences and consider ways to revise them. (You might create parallel structures or change the sentence structure altogether.)

1. The movie’s starting time and whether we could afford the tickets were both more important to us than were the opinions of the reviewers.

2. I was working approximately forty hours a week, going to school full time, and still tried to make time for my social life.

3. I can’t decide which activity I prefer: to swim at the shore in July, when the sand is warm, or jogging along country roads in October when the autumn leaves are at their colorful best.

4. When I stepped on that stage a feeling just swept over me. It was a feeling of sheer excitement, nervousness, and to throw up like never before.

5. Jane liked reading the paper more than lunch.

6. Not only does Christmas leave us with wonderful gifts, but also with memories of a great family holiday.

7. When I was a little girl, my dad tried to turn me into the little boy he never had. In trying to accomplish this, my dad and I shot guns, went squirrel hunting, and fishing.

8. My new exercise program and going on a strict diet will give me a new shape before bikini season.

9. I will either take the train or the bus.

10. Bowling, like other sports, requires physical exertion and is the number one participation sport in the country.