Parallelism matters

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By Josh BernoffSeptember 14, 2023

Parallelism — that is, consistency in lists — isn't just an arbitrary rule that copy editors enforce. It's a powerful tool to help your readers navigate your writing, and to trust you.

What is parallelism? It is consistency in length, parts of speech, and all other qualities in a list of items such as a bulleted list, a numbered list, or a set of chapter titles in a table of contents. When you violate parallelism and create inconsistency, readers notice — sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously — and it disrupts the flow of their reading.

To illustrate, let's take a look at a list that's *not* parallel. (This isn't meant as an actual set of advice, it's here just to make a point.)

Lists should be:

- 1. **Punchy.** Don't write long items.
- **Consistent in bullets.** Don't mix numbers and bulleted items.
- Either always starting with a bold opener or not: pick one or the other.
- **Don't write some sentences and some single words to start.** The inconsistency will confuse people.
- **Lists are space efficient and easy to scan.** A long paragraph that ticks off items one by one is hard to keep track of, while a list makes it easy to see where each item begins and ends.

Now there's a list that would give a copy editor fits.

It's fine to start each item with a word. It's not fine to start some with a word and some with a phrase or sentence.

Lists shouldn't have some short bullets and some long, that confuses people.

It's fine have a list where each item is a command; such lists are useful in how-to books. But if you do that, don't mix commands with, say adjectives or declarative sentences.

It's not just about parts of speech. For example, if every item in a list is a command, but some are advice to individual workers, others are advice to managers, and others are advice to senior executives, the reader will find the list hard to

follow.

If every item in the list starts with the letter S, you can create a mnemonic out of it ("The five S's.") But if it's four S's and one T, you again jar people into wondering why it isn't consistent.

Think of parallelism as a tool, not just a rule

Here's the table of contents of Denise Lee Yohn's book *What Great Brands Do: The Seven Brand-Building Principles That Separate the Best from the Rest*:

1. Great Brands Start Inside
2. Great Brands Avoid Selling Products
3. Great Brands Ignore Trends
4. Great Brands Don't Chase Customers
5. Great Brands Sweat the Small Stuff
6. Great Brands Commit and Stay Committed
7. Great Brands Never Have to "Give Back."
8. The Eighth Principle: Brand as Business

This is a master class in parallelism. Each of the first seven chapter titles is a statement about brands; taken together, they make up Denise's whole thesis. Then she breaks parallelism *on purpose* in Chapter 8, just to make you sit up and pay attention.

In my book *Build a Better Business Book: How to Plan, Write, and Promote a Book That Matters*, I made a conscious decision to create a subtitle for each chapter that was a command to the reader. While the chapter titles are not completely parallel, the subtitles are:

1. Business Books Are Stories. *To engage readers, tell a story.*
2. Why Write a Book? *Build a book that matters.*
3. Great Ideas and Great Titles. *Stand out in the reader's mind.*
4. Publishing Models. *Select a publishing path for speed, cost, or prestige.*
5. Book Proposals That Sell. *Secure a publishing deal with sexy proposal.*
6. Book as Narrative. *Structure your chapters to tell a story.*
7. The Book Plan. *Be a planner, not a pantser.*
8. The Employee Author. *Make your book support your job — and vice versa.*
9. Case Studies and Stories. *To compel readers, find and write about people.*
10. . . .

I think this is a natural way to write a how-to book; each chapter tells you how to do a specific thing. Each chapter subtitle explains what to do as revealed in that chapter, so you know just what you're going to learn.

Acronyms and initialisms are another opportunity for parallelism. In *Groundswell,* Charlene Li and I suggested four steps to approach any social media program, using the acronym POST:

- People. Who is your audience, and how do they use social technology?
- Objective. What are you trying to accomplish?
- Strategy. How is this part of a broader effort for your brand?
- Technology. What specific tools and platforms will you use to accomplish your goals?

Note that each item is a one-word noun. The order also matters: we wanted to be clear that you should start with people and end with technology, not the other way around.

Your book is made of structures: chapters, sections, heads, subheads, tables, lists, figure captions, and so on. Look for opportunities to create parallelism in your writing. It's not just for neat freaks. It's a way to help your reader understand, navigate, and appreciate the power of your ideas.