Parallel Constructions

Parallelism in writing refers to the use of equal grammatical forms or matching sentence structures formulated to express similar ideas.

Parallelism in Lists

• Incorrect: Susan likes to swim in the ocean, biking in town, and a hike in the mountains.

The above sentence is incorrect because the three actions, equal in relationship, are each structured differently.

Correct: Susan likes to swim in the ocean, to bike in town, and to hike in the mountains.
Correct: Susan likes to swim in the ocean, bike in town, and hike in the mountains.
Correct: Susan likes swimming in the ocean, biking in town, and hiking in the mountains.

The phrases in the correct sentences above are parallel because the verb beginning each phrase is in the same form {infinitive (to + verb) and gerund (-ing or continuing action verb)}.

• Incorrect: The professor explained how to organize and about documenting.

The sentence above is incorrect because “to organize” is the infinitive form and about documenting is the gerund form.

Correct: The professor explained how to organize a paper and how to document sources.
Correct: The professor explained organization and documentation.
Correct: The professor explained about organizing the paper and documenting the sources.

The phrases in the correct sentences are parallel because they contain the same forms of the verbs.

Parallelism in Comparisons

• Incorrect: When writing a paper, research is usually more time consuming than documenting sources.

The sentence above is incorrect because the two items being compared are in different grammatical forms; one is a noun in the regular form, and the other is a gerund.

Correct: When writing a paper, research is usually more time consuming than documentation.
Correct: When writing a paper, researching is usually more time consuming than documenting sources.

The phrases in the first correct sentence are parallel because they are both nouns, while the phrases in the sentence that follows are both gerunds.