Parallelism in Sentence Structure

According to The Writer’s Harbrace Handbook, “Two or more elements are considered parallel when they have similar grammatical forms.”

Grammatical forms include words, verb types, phrases and clauses.

It is important to make sure all sentences follow the rules of parallelism because the lack of parallel structure in sentences can cause misunderstandings in writing style and reading.

PARALLEL WORDS
When a list is present in a sentence, the structure of the verbs should be parallel.

Incorrect
If students want to pass a course, they must **attend** every class, be sure to **stay** awake, **taking** good notes, and **pass** all of their tests.
Correct
If students want to pass a course, they must **attend class, stay awake, take notes,** and **pass tests.**

Incorrect
The athlete **is** full of strength and **practices** endurance to run the two miles.
Correct
The athlete **is** full of strength and **endurance** to run the two miles.

PARALLEL VERBS
In order for a sentence to be correct, all verbs and their forms must agree. The simplest way to check if verbs are parallel is to make sure they are all in the same tense. If they are all in the same tense, then make sure they all have the same ending.

Incorrect
Patty **ate** macaroons, **drank** soda and **was dancing** the tango.
Correct
Patty ate macaroons, drank soda and danced the tango.

The “to ___” Verbs
The “to ___” verbs (to walk, to talk, to eat, to chat, to drink...) are called infinitives. With infinitives, a very simple rule applies: the word "to" must either go only before the first verb in the list, or before every verb in the list. For example:

Correct
He likes to swim, to sail, and to dance.
He likes to swim, sail, and dance.

Incorrect
He likes to swim, sail, and to dance.

PARALLEL PHRASES
Most phrases are formed by a preposition (of, from, under, below, to, etc.). A prepositional phrase provides information about place, time, cause, manner, etc.

If there are a series of prepositional phrases in a sentence, the structure must be parallel.

Incorrect
He searched for his cell phone in the car, the bed, and his book bag.
Correct
He searched for his cell phone in the car, under the bed, and through his book bag.

Incorrect
For about fifteen minutes, I have been pacing in my office, hands on my hips, my face with a scowl, and feeling a grudge.
Correct
For about fifteen minutes, I have been pacing in my office, hands on my hips, a scowl on my face, and a grudge on my mind.