

I once knew a high school footballer who also was a premier wrestler. When he tackled someone, the other guy went down for sure. His wrestling experience gave him techniques of leverage and weight shifting that made him more effective in a very different sport. Similarly, writers can use the methods of one form of writing to improve their work in a different category.

Parallelism is one such technique and it is borrowed from poetry. Don't let the fancy name turn you off. It is really a very simple technique. Chances are you already use it without realizing it.

The Judeo-Christian bible (the Torah or Old Testament) is full of poetry, and that poetry is full of parallelism. A statement is repeated in different words, or explained further in the following line. The epic poets of the Anglo-Saxons actually made parallelism their art form. Every line had two parts with a distinct pause in the middle. Politicians will use repetition and parallelism in speeches, building to a climax.

But how can we use this technique in the modern novel? Try this version of an old nursery rhyme for starters: "Jill had always loved Jack. From their first meeting she had given her heart to him. But Jack did not return her affection. He only cared about his bucket and the water it would contain. Thus when they went up the hill together their fate was sealed. Jack's obsession was to cause their downfall."

Well it's not deathless prose. But it does illustrate parallelism. There are six sentences in three parallel pairs. Each pair deals with the same thought in two alternate ways.

There is parallelism even in the above paragraph. Can you spot the parallel pairs? Once you start writing in parallel sentences or phrases it becomes addictive. It is hard to stop writing in parallels.

And, of course, it is possible to parallel three sentences or phrases instead of two. "He was tall and blond, tanned and fit, handsome and charming." There are some threesomes in this article.

Parallelism can involve restating the same thought, or just putting one phrase or sentence after the other in a rhythmic pattern. There is rhythm in prose writing just as there is in poetry or music. Try to sense the rhythm. One way to pick up the rhythm is to read aloud. (Explain what you are doing to family members so that they won't be calling for men in white coats!)

Parallelism need not be forced or artificial. After some practice it becomes almost second nature. So take some of your own writing and look for unconscious paralleling of phrases, sentences or thoughts. If they don't exist try inserting some. Develop your own rhythm of parallels. It is an easy, painless way to add variety and color to your writing.