



Verbals: Gerunds, Participles, and Infinitives

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In this handout, the three types of verbals are discussed: gerunds, participles, and infinitives.

Gerunds and participles are also compared and contrasted in a separate section of this handout because they can both end in *-ing* but have different functions in a sentence.

Finally, since they can both function as nouns in a sentence despite their different forms, gerunds and infinitives are compared and contrasted in the last section below.

Throughout this document, occasional example sentences with wording that might be considered nonstandard, ambiguous, or at least peculiar in formal writing are marked with an asterisk (*).

Gerunds

A gerund is a verbal that ends in *-ing* and functions as a noun. The term *verbal* indicates that a gerund, like the other two kinds of verbals, is based on a verb and therefore expresses action or a state of being. However, since a gerund functions as a noun, it occupies some positions in a sentence that a noun ordinarily would, for example: subject, direct object, subject complement, and object of preposition.

Gerund as subject:

- *Traveling* might satisfy your desire for new experiences.
- The study abroad program might satisfy your desire for new experiences.

Gerund as direct object:

- They do not appreciate my *singing*.
- They do not appreciate my assistance.

Gerund as subject complement:

- My cat's favorite activity is *sleeping*.
- My cat's favorite food is salmon.

Gerund as object of preposition:

- The police arrested him for *speeding*.
- The police arrested him for criminal activity.

A Gerund Phrase is a group of words consisting of a gerund and the modifier(s) and/or (pro)noun(s) or noun phrase(s) that function as the direct object(s), indirect object(s), or complement(s) of the action or state expressed in the gerund, such as:

<p><i>Finding a needle in a haystack</i> would be easier than what we're trying to do.</p>	<p>The gerund phrase functions as the subject of the sentence. Finding (gerund) a needle (direct object of action expressed in gerund) in a haystack (prepositional phrase as adverb)</p>
<p>I hope that you appreciate <i>my offering you this opportunity</i> .</p>	<p>The gerund phrase functions as the direct object of the verb <i>appreciate</i> . my (possessive pronoun adjective form, modifying the gerund) offering (gerund) you (indirect object of action expressed in gerund) this opportunity (direct object of action expressed in gerund)</p>
<p>Newt's favorite tactic has been <i>lying to his constituents</i> .</p>	<p>The gerund phrase functions as the subject complement. lying to (gerund) his constituents (direct object of action expressed in gerund)</p>
<p>You might get in trouble for <i>faking an illness to avoid work</i> .</p>	<p>The gerund phrase functions as the object of the preposition <i>for</i> . faking (gerund) an illness (direct object of action expressed in gerund) to avoid work (infinitive phrase as adverb)</p>
<p><i>Being the boss</i> made Jeff feel uneasy.</p>	<p>The gerund phrase functions as the subject of the sentence. Being (gerund) the boss (subject complement for <i>Jeff</i> , via state of being expressed in gerund)</p>

Punctuation

A gerund virtually never requires any punctuation with it.

Points to remember:

1. A gerund is a verbal ending in *-ing* that is used as a noun.
2. A gerund phrase consists of a gerund plus modifier(s), object(s), and/or complement(s).
3. Gerunds and gerund phrases virtually never require punctuation.

Exercise on Gerunds:

Underline the gerunds or gerund phrases in the following sentences and label how they function in the sentence (subject, direct object, subject complement, object of preposition).

1. Swimming keeps me in shape.
2. Swimming in your pool is always fun.
3. Telling your father was a mistake.
4. The college recommends sending applications early.
5. He won the game by scoring during the overtime period.
6. Her most important achievement was winning the national championship.
7. Going to work today took all my energy.
8. Fighting for a losing cause made them depressed.

Answers to all exercises are available at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_verbalsA1.html.

Participles

A participle is a verbal that is used as an adjective and most often ends in *-ing* or *-ed*. The term *verbal* indicates that a participle, like the other two kinds of verbals, is based on a verb and therefore expresses action or a state of being. However, since they function as adjectives, participles modify nouns or pronouns. There are two types of participles: present participles and past participles. Present participles end in *-ing*. Past participles end in *-ed*, *-en*, *-d*, *-t*, or *-n*, as in the words *asked*, *eaten*, *saved*, *dealt*, and *seen*.

- The *crying* baby had a wet diaper.
- *Shaken*, he walked away from the *wrecked* car.
- The *burning* log fell off the fire.
- *Smiling*, she hugged the *panting* dog.

A participial phrase is a group of words consisting of a participle and the modifier(s) and/or (pro)noun(s) or noun phrase(s) that function as the direct object(s), indirect object(s), or complement(s) of the action or state expressed in the participle, such as:

Removing his coat , Jack rushed to the river.	The participial phrase functions as an adjective modifying Jack . Removing (participle) his coat (direct object of action expressed in participle)
Delores noticed her cousin walking along the shoreline .	The participial phrase functions as an adjective modifying cousin . walking (participle) along the shoreline (prepositional phrase as adverb)
Children introduced to music early develop strong intellectual skills.	The participial phrase functions as an adjective modifying children . introduced (to) (participle) music (direct object of action expressed in participle) early (adverb)
Having been a gymnast, Lynn knew the importance of exercise.	The participial phrase functions as an adjective modifying Lynn . Having been (participle) a gymnast (subject complement for Lynn , via state of being expressed in participle)

Placement: In order to prevent confusion, a participial phrase must be placed as close to the noun it modifies as possible, and the noun must be clearly stated.

- Carrying a heavy pile of books , his foot caught on a step. *
- Carrying a heavy pile of books , he caught his foot on a step.

In the first sentence there is no clear indication of who or what is performing the action expressed in the participle *carrying* . Certainly *foot* can't be logically understood to function in this way. This situation is an example of a dangling modifier error since the modifier (the participial phrase) is not modifying any specific noun in the sentence and is thus left "dangling." Since a person must be doing the carrying for the sentence to make sense, a noun or pronoun that refers to a person must be in the place immediately after the participial phrase, as in the second sentence. (For more information on dangling modifiers, see our handout at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_dangmod.html.)

Punctuation: When a participial phrase begins a sentence, a comma should be placed after the phrase.

- Arriving at the store , I found that it was closed.
- Washing and polishing the car , Frank developed sore muscles.

If the participle or participial phrase comes in the middle of a sentence, it should be set off with commas only if the information is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

- Sid, watching an old movie , drifted in and out of sleep.
- The church, destroyed by a fire , was never rebuilt.

Note that if the participial phrase is essential to the meaning of the sentence, no commas should be used:

- The student earning the highest grade point average will receive a special award.
- The guy wearing the chicken costume is my cousin.

If a participial phrase comes at the end of a sentence, a comma usually precedes the phrase if it modifies an earlier word in the sentence but not if the phrase directly follows the word it modifies.

- The local residents often saw Ken wandering through the streets.
(The phrase modifies *Ken* , not *residents* .)
- Tom nervously watched the woman, alarmed by her silence.
(The phrase modifies *Tom* , not *woman* .)

Points to remember:

1. A participle is a verbal ending in *-ing* (present) or *-ed* , *-en* , *-d* , *-t* , or *-n* (past) that functions as an adjective, modifying a noun or pronoun.
2. A participial phrase consists of a participle plus modifier(s), object(s), and/or complement(s).
3. Participles and participial phrases must be placed as close to the nouns or pronouns they modify as possible, and those nouns or pronouns must be clearly stated.
4. A participial phrase is set off with commas when it: a) comes at the beginning of a sentence, b) interrupts a sentence as a nonessential element, or c) comes at the end of a sentence and is separated from the word it modifies.

Exercise on Participles:

Underline the participial phrase(s) in each of the following sentences, and draw a line to the noun or pronoun modified.

1. Getting up at five, we got an early start.
2. Facing college standards, the students realized that they hadn't worked hard enough in high school.
3. Statistics reported by the National Education Association revealed that seventy percent of American colleges offer remedial English classes emphasizing composition.
4. The overloaded car gathered speed slowly.
5. Gathering my courage, I asked for a temporary loan.

In each of the following sentences, underline the participial phrase(s), draw a line to the word(s) modified, and punctuate the sentence correctly. Remember that some sentences may not need punctuation.

6. Starting out as an army officer Karen's father was frequently transferred.
7. Mrs. Sears showing more bravery than wisdom invited thirty boys and girls to a party.
8. The student left in charge of the class was unable to keep order.
9. Applicants must investigate various colleges learning as much as possible about them before applying for admission.
10. The crying boy angered by the bully began to fight.

Rewrite the following sentences (you may need to reword them slightly) with the correct placement and punctuation of the participial phrases.

11. Espousing a conservative point of view the proposal for more spending on federal social programs bothered him.
12. Absorbed in an interesting conversation my scheduled appointment time passed unnoticed.

Answers to all exercises are available at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_verbalsA1.html.

Infinitives

An infinitive is a verbal consisting of the word *to* plus a verb (in its simplest "stem" form) and functioning as a noun, adjective, or adverb. The term *verbal* indicates that an infinitive, like the other two kinds of verbals, is based on a verb and therefore expresses action or a state of being. However, the infinitive may function as a subject, direct object, subject complement, adjective, or adverb in a sentence. Although an infinitive is easy to locate because of the *to* + verb form, deciding what function it has in a sentence can sometimes be confusing.

- *To wait* seemed foolish when decisive action was required. (subject)
- Everyone wanted *to go*. (direct object)
- His ambition is *to fly*. (subject complement)
- He lacked the strength *to resist*. (adjective)
- We must study *to learn*. (adverb)

Be sure not to confuse an infinitive--a verbal consisting of *to* plus a verb--with a prepositional phrase beginning with *to*, which consists of *to* plus a noun or pronoun and any modifiers.

Infinitives: to fly, to draw, to become, to enter, to stand, to catch, to belong

Prepositional Phrases: to him, to the committee, to my house, to the mountains, to us, to this address

An Infinitive Phrase is a group of words consisting of an infinitive and the modifier(s) and/or (pro)noun(s) or noun phrase(s) that function as the actor(s), direct object(s), indirect object(s), or complement(s) of the action or state expressed in the infinitive, such as:

We intended <i>to leave early</i> .	The infinitive phrase functions as the direct object of the verb <i>intended</i>. to leave (infinitive) early (adverb)
I have a paper <i>to write before class</i> .	The infinitive phrase functions as an adjective modifying <i>paper</i>. to write (infinitive) before class (prepositional phrase as adverb)
Phil agreed <i>to give me a ride</i> .	The infinitive phrase functions as the direct object of the verb <i>agreed</i>. to give (infinitive) me (indirect object of action expressed in infinitive) a ride (direct object of action expressed in infinitive)
They asked <i>me to bring some food</i> .	The infinitive phrase functions as the direct object of the verb <i>asked</i>. me (actor or "subject" of infinitive phrase) to bring (infinitive) some food (direct object of action expressed in infinitive)
Everyone wanted <i>Carol to be the captain of the team</i> .	The infinitive phrase functions as the direct object of the verb <i>wanted</i>. Carol (actor or "subject" of infinitive phrase) to be (infinitive) the captain (subject complement for <i>Carol</i> , via state of being expressed in infinitive) of the team (prepositional phrase as adjective)

Actors: In these last two examples the actor of the infinitive phrase could be roughly characterized as the "subject" of the action or state expressed in the infinitive. It is somewhat misleading to use the word *subject*, however, since an infinitive phrase is not a full clause with a subject and a finite verb. Also notice that when it is a pronoun, the actor appears in the objective case (*me*, not *I*, in the fourth example). Certain verbs, when they take an infinitive direct object, require an actor for the infinitive phrase; others can't have an actor. Still other verbs can go either way, as the charts below illustrate.

Verbs that take infinitive objects without actors:

agree	begin	continue	decide
fail	hesitate	hope	intend
learn	neglect	offer	plan
prefer	pretend	promise	refuse
remember	start	try	

Examples:

- Most students *plan* to study.
- We *began* to learn.
- They *offered* to pay.
- They *neglected* to pay.
- She *promised* to return.

In all of these examples no actor can come between the italicized main (finite) verb and the infinitive direct-object phrase.

Verbs that take infinitive objects with actors:

advise	allow	convince	remind
encourage	force	hire	teach
instruct	invite	permit	tell
implore	incite	appoint	order

Examples:

- He *reminded* me to buy milk.
- Their fathers *advise* them to study.
- She *forced* the defendant to admit the truth.
- You've *convinced* the director of the program to change her position.
- I *invite* you to consider the evidence.

In all of these examples an actor is required after the italicized main (finite) verb and before the infinitive direct-object phrase.

Verbs that use either pattern:

ask	expect	(would) like	want
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Examples:

- I *asked* to see the records.
- I *asked* him to show me the records.
- Trent *expected* his group to win.
- Trent *expected* to win.
- Brenda *likes* to drive fast.
- Brenda *likes* her friend to drive fast.

In all of these examples the italicized main verb can take an infinitive object with or without an actor.

Punctuation: If the infinitive is used as an adverb and is the beginning phrase in a sentence, it should be set off with a comma; otherwise, no punctuation is needed for an infinitive phrase.

- *To buy a basket of flowers*, John had to spend his last dollar.
- *To improve your writing*, you must consider your purpose and audience.

Points to remember:

1. An infinitive is a verbal consisting of the word *to* plus a verb; it may be used as a noun, adjective, or adverb.
2. An infinitive phrase consists of an infinitive plus modifier(s), object(s), complement(s), and/or actor(s).
3. An infinitive phrase requires a comma only if it is used as an adverb at the beginning of a sentence.

Spilt infinitives:

Split infinitives occur when additional words are included between *to* and the verb in an infinitive. Many readers find a single adverb splitting the infinitive to be acceptable, but this practice should be avoided in formal writing.

Examples:

- I like *to* on a nice day *walk* in the woods. * (unacceptable)
- On a nice day, I like *to walk* in the woods. (revised)
- I needed *to* quickly *gather* my personal possessions. (acceptable in informal contexts)
- I needed *to gather* my personal possessions quickly. (revised for formal contexts)

Exercise on Infinitives:

Underline the infinitive phrase and label the way it is used in the sentence, adding any punctuation as needed.

1. I want to go.
2. I want you to go home.
3. We want to see the play.
4. To see a shooting star is good luck.
5. To fight against those odds would be ridiculous.

Now underline the infinitive phrase and label how it is used in the sentence.

6. To design a new building for them would be challenging.
7. I want him to be my bodyguard.
8. Jim is expected to program computers at his new job.
9. They will try to build a new stadium in ten years.
10. To distill a quart of moonshine takes two hours.
11. The president wants to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.
12. She has the money to buy it.
13. We demonstrated to attract attention to our agenda.
14. I do not like to give poor grades.
15. The dogs were taught to stand, to sit, and to bark on command.
16. To be great is to be true to yourself and to the highest principles of honor.
17. To see is to believe.

Comparing Gerunds and Participles

Look at the following pair of sentences. In the first, the use of a gerund (functioning as a noun) allows the meaning to be expressed more precisely than in the second. In the first sentence the interrupting itself, a specific behavior, is precisely indicated as the cause of the speaker's irritation. In the second the cause of the irritation is identified less precisely as Bill, who just happens to have been interrupting. (In the second sentence, *interrupting* is actually a participle, not a gerund, since it functions as an adjective modifying *Bill*.)

I was irritated by Bill's constant interrupting.
 I was irritated by Bill, constantly interrupting.

The same pattern is shown in these other example pairs below: in the first of each pair, a gerund (noun-function) is used; in the second, a participle (adjective-function). Notice the subtle change in meaning between the two sentences in each pair.

Examples:

The guitarist's finger-picking was extraordinary. (The *technique* was extraordinary.)
 The guitarist, finger-picking, was extraordinary. (The *person* was extraordinary, demonstrating the technique.)

He was not impressed with their competing. (The *competing* did not impress him.)
 He was not impressed with them competing. (*They* did not impress him as they competed.)

Grandpa enjoyed his grandchildren's running and laughing.
 Grandpa enjoyed his grandchildren, running and laughing.* (Ambiguous: who is running and laughing?)

Comparing Gerunds and Infinitives

The difference in the form of gerunds and infinitives is quite clear just from comparing the following lists:

Gerunds: swimming, hoping, telling, eating, dreaming
Infinitives: to swim, to hope, to tell, to eat, to dream

Their functions, however, overlap. Gerunds always function as nouns, but infinitives often also serve as nouns. Deciding which to use can be confusing in many situations, especially for people whose first language is not English.

Confusion between gerunds and infinitives occurs primarily in cases in which one or the other functions as the direct object in a sentence. In English some verbs take gerunds as verbal direct objects exclusively while other verbs take only infinitives and still others can take either. Many such verbs are listed below, organized according to which kind of verbal direct object they take.

Verbs that take only infinitives as verbal direct objects

agree	decide	expect	hesitate
learn	need	promise	neglect
hope	want	plan	attempt
propose	intend	pretend	

Examples:

I hope to go on a vacation soon.
 (not: I hope going on a vacation soon.*)

He promised to go on a diet.
 (not: He promised going on a diet. *)

They agreed to sign the treaty.
 (not: They agreed signing the treaty.*)

Because she was nervous, she hesitated to speak.
 (not: Because she was nervous, she hesitated speaking.*)

They will attempt to resuscitate the victim
 (not: They will attempt resuscitating the victim.*)

Verbs that take only gerunds as verbal direct objects

deny	risk	delay	consider
can't help	keep	give up	be fond of
finish	quit	put off	practice
postpone	tolerate	suggest	stop (quit)
regret	enjoy	keep (on)	dislike
admit	avoid	recall	mind
miss	detest	appreciate	recommend
get/be through	get/be tired of	get/be accustomed to	get/be used to

Examples:

They always avoid drinking before driving.
(not: They always avoid to drink before driving.*)

I recall asking her that question.
(not: I recall to ask her that question.*)

She put off buying a new jacket.
(not: She put off to buy a new jacket.*)

Mr. Allen enjoys cooking.
(not: Mr. Allen enjoys to cook.*)

Charles keeps calling her.
(not: Charles keeps to call her.*)

Verbs that take gerunds or infinitives as verbal direct objects

start	begin	continue	hate
prefer	like	love	try
remember			

Examples:

She has continued *to work* at the store.
She has continued *working* at the store.

They like *to go* to the movies.
They like *going* to the movies.

Brent started *to walk* home.
Brent started *walking* home.

Forget and remember

These two verbs change meaning depending on whether a gerund or infinitive is used as the object.

Examples:

Jack forgets to take out the cat. (He regularly forgets.)
Jack forgets taking out the cat. (He did it, but he doesn't remember now.)

Jack forgot to take out the cat. (He never did it.)
Jack forgot taking out the cat. (He did it, but he didn't remember sometime later.)

Jack remembers to take out the cat. (He regularly remembers.)
Jack remembers taking out the cat. (He did it, and he remembers now.)

Jack remembered to take out the cat. (He did it.)
Jack remembered taking out the cat. (He did it, and he remembered sometime later.)

In the second of each pair of example sentences above, the past progressive gerund form *having taken* can be used in place of *taking* to avoid any possible confusion.

Sense verbs that take an object plus a gerund or a simple verb

Certain sense verbs take an object followed by either a gerund or a simple verb (infinitive form minus the word *to*). With many of the verbs that follow the object, the use of the gerund indicates continuous action while the use of the simple verb indicates a one-time action. Still, sometimes the simple verb can indicate continuous action if one-time action wouldn't make sense in the context.

feel	hear	notice	watch
see	smell	observe	

Examples:

We watched him *playing* basketball. (continuous action)

We watched him *play* basketball. (continuous action)

I felt my heart *pumping* vigorously. (continuous action)

I felt my heart *pump* vigorously. (continuous action)

She saw them *jumping* on the bed. (continuous action)

She saw them *jump* on the bed. (one-time action)

Tom heard the victim *shouting* for help. (continuous action)

Tom heard the victim *shout* for help. (one-time action)

The detective noticed the suspect *biting* his nails. (continuous action)

The detective noticed the suspect *bite* his nails. (one-time action)

We could smell the pie *baking* in the kitchen. (continuous action)

We could smell the pie *bake* in the kitchen. (continuous action)

Sometimes the simple-verb version might seem unconventional, so it's safer in most cases to use the gerund version.

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