

Participles, Gerunds and Infinitives

One of the more confusing practices in English grammar involves the use of **verbals** (*participles, gerunds and infinitives*), which are words that look like *verbs* but that function as *nouns, adjectives, or adverbs* in sentences.

Participles

Participles usually look like either past tense (-ed) or continuous tense (-ing) verbs, but they actually function as adjectives. The present participle is formed by adding -ing to the verb stem. As an adjective, the present participle modifies a noun that affects someone or something else.

Ex. The article is interesting. or The article was interesting.

In other words, the 'article' in this example is affecting the speaker by provoking her/his interest. Alternatively, the present participle can be placed before the noun:

Ex. the interesting article

Note: In this case, the present participle and noun together create an adjectival phrase rather than a complete sentence as in the first two examples.

The past participle is formed by adding -ed to the verb stem; however, some irregular verbs may end in -d (ex. '*paid*'), -en (ex. '*taken*'), -n (ex. '*seen*'), or -t (ex. '*burnt*'). **Note:** With the ending -t, the more commonly used past tense form of the verb is the conventional -ed; for example, '*to learn*' is '*learned*' in academic writing in North America, while the past participle form is '*learnt*'. As an adjective, the past participle modifies a noun that is affected by someone or something else.

Ex. The professor is interested in the article. or The professor was interested in the article.

These examples are similar to the first two examples for the present participle, but notice that, in these two cases, the focus is on the person and her/his reaction to the 'interesting article'. In other words, the quality of '*being interesting*' does not belong to the professor, but rather to the article, and the professor is in a state of '*being interested*' because the article has that quality. This important distinction in meaning between present and past participles can perhaps best be expressed in the two images below:



Past Participle: the frightened man

vs.

Present Participle: the frightening man

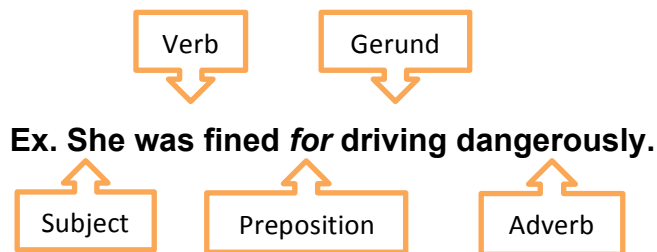
Gerunds

Gerunds look like continuous tense (-ing) verbs but function as nouns.

Ex. My favorite hobby is swimming.



Notice that the verb in this example is not 'swimming'. The word 'swimming' describes a hobby or an activity, and so is a noun rather than a verb. Gerunds often follow prepositions in sentences.



Note: As in the above example, gerunds, though nouns, can be modified by adverbs or adjectives. An alternative form of the above sentence could read “**She was fined for dangerous driving**”, with ‘dangerous’ included as the adjective.

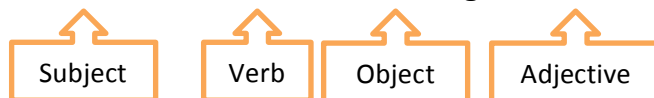
Infinitives

Infinitives are the standard, dictionary form of verbs that include the word ‘to’, as in ‘to go’, ‘to see’ and ‘to explain’. Infinitives function as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs in sentences.

Noun: **Ex. The ministers wanted to ratify the trade agreement.**



Adjective: **Ex. We do not have the funding to build the proposed sports facility.**



Adverb: **Ex. The graduate student tried to complete her thesis.**



Note: In the first example, the verb ‘wanted’ takes the infinitive ‘to ratify’ as its *direct object noun*. In other words, the *thing* the ministers really wanted was ‘ratification’. In the second example, the verb already has a *direct object noun* (‘the funding’), and so the infinitive must act as an *adjective* that

modifies that noun. In the final example, the past tense verb 'tried' is followed immediately by the infinitive, and so the infinitive functions as an *adverb* because it tells us why the student was 'trying'.

Gerunds Vs. Infinitives

Writers often have problems deciding if a particular sentence should include a gerund or an infinitive. One way of determining the difference between the two is to remember that gerunds describe actions that are *real, fixed, or completed*, while infinitives describe actions that are *unreal, abstract, or in the future*. The following two sentences are an example of this difficulty:

Ex. I remembered taking my passport.

Gerund

Ex. I remembered to take my passport.

Infinitive

The first example includes the gerund 'taking' (a noun), and so the phrase 'taking my passport' means the speaker recalled an event in the past in which s/he took her/his passport. The second example, by comparison, includes the infinitive 'to take' as an adjective affecting the noun 'passport', which means the speaker in this example is emphasizing that s/he *had to* bring her/his passport with her/him because of the possibility (abstract) that s/he might have needed it.

While the previous two sentences have different meanings, there are cases when the gerund or infinitive form of the same verb can be used to indicate the same idea. Consider the following:

Ex. I anticipate having the report done today.

Gerund

Ex. I expect to have the report done today.

Infinitive

Both of these sentences express the same idea, but one uses a gerund ('having') and the other uses an infinitive ('to have'). The important difference between the two is their respective verbs: **anticipate vs. expect**. The table below lists common verbs that take gerunds or infinitives:

Gerunds	Infinitives
Advise = I advise taking more time.	Agree = He agreed to wait for a better time.
Complete = She completed analyzing the data.	Decide = They have decided to help us.
Consider = Let's consider eating now.	Hope = I hope to prove my hypothesis.
Discuss = We should discuss having a meeting.	Need = You need to listen.
Involve = This role involves using chemicals.	Prepare = Let's prepare to leave.
Recommend = I recommend leaving it behind.	Refuse = She refused to be denied.
Suggest = He suggested switching the date.	Want = I want to explain my ideas.

Another way of determining when to use gerunds is by including prepositions in your sentences. This method works because only gerunds, and never infinitives, follow prepositions.

Ex. She received money *after* applying for a grant.

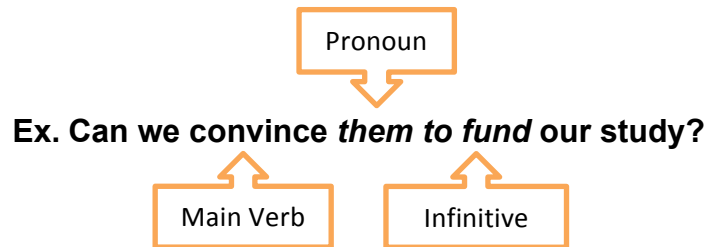
Preposition Gerund

Note: Do not confuse the preposition "to" with the infinitive form, or with an auxiliary form like *have to*, *used to*, or *going to*.

Ex. The researcher used the right approach *to solving* the problem.



However, infinitives, and never gerunds, can follow indirect objects. In these cases, the main verb in the sentence is followed by a noun or pronoun referring to a person, and then an infinitive.



Practice Exercise

In the sentences below, fill in the blanks with a present or past participle, a gerund, or an infinitive.

- 1) The students were _____ (confuse) by the professor's lecture.
- 2) I would like _____ (buy) a new dress for graduation.
- 3) Babysitting young children can be _____ (exhaust) for many people.
- 4) He wanted his mother _____ (help) the neighbors with their garden.
- 5) Jane needed help with _____ (recover) her data.
- 6) The _____ (cry) baby annoyed everyone on the plane.
- 7) We do not have time _____ (discuss) this problem now!
- 8) When Dan gets _____ (bore), he goes fishing.

Answers

- 1) The students were *confused* by the professor's lecture. (Past Participle)
- 2) I would like *to buy* a new dress for graduation. (Infinitive)
- 3) Babysitting young children can be *exhausting* for many people. (Present Participle)
- 4) He wanted his mother *to help* the neighbors with their garden. (Infinitive)
- 5) Jane needed help with *recovering* her data. (Gerund)
- 6) The *crying* baby annoyed everyone on the plane. (Present Participle)
- 7) We do not have time *to discuss* this problem now! (Infinitive)
- 8) When Dan gets *bored*, he goes fishing. (Past Participle)