

Nouns: Gerunds & Infinitives

Nouns name persons, places, or things and can do many different jobs in a sentence. *Gerunds* and *infinitives* are two special groups of nouns that usually name *activities* (activities are things) rather than persons or places.

Most nouns are pretty easy to identify (*bicycle, California*), and you may even have mastered abstract nouns (*anticipation, weekend*) but still be misled by gerunds and infinitives because they look a little like verbs.

Gerunds look like orphaned *-ing* verbs, without the auxiliary—*playing*. Infinitives are *to + a verb—to play*.

He loves playing Minecraft (gerund as direct object).

He loves to play Minecraft (infinitive as direct object).

Subjects

Like other nouns, gerunds and infinitives can function as the subjects of sentences:

Playing Minecraft is more important to him than doing homework.

To play Minecraft is more important to him than to do homework.

Noun complements & appositives

Infinitives can be noun complements or appositives, which rename or expand on another noun. Gerunds can also be appositives:

His desire to play Minecraft is interfering with his school work

His expressed desire, to work as an independent game designer, seems appropriate.

His expressed desire, working as an independent game designer, seems appropriate.

Infinitives often follow abstract nouns like *desire* to focus and define them. Here are other examples of infinitives acting as noun complements:

Abstract noun

suggestion
decision
opportunity
reminder
tendency

Infinitive as Noun Complement

Your suggestion to arrive early was good advice.
Their decision to delay the wedding was not easy.
You should take this opportunity to travel before looking for a job.
That's a reminder to return the library book.
She has a tendency to be late.

Direct objects

In the first two sets of examples above, the gerunds and infinitives acted as the subject and as the direct object of the sentence. With a direct object, however, you are not always free to choose a gerund or an infinitive as you please. Some verbs, like *enjoy*, require a gerund direct object (*enjoys going*) and others, like *agree*, require an infinitive direct object (*agrees to go*). Other verbs, like *loves*, allow you to choose either one without affecting the meaning (*love to go, love going*). However, some verbs will have a different meaning depending on whether you use a gerund or an infinitive as a direct object (*remember to go* and *remember going* mean different things). Here is a partial list, but for more information, consult an ESL or writer's guide:

Must use infinitive direct object	Must use gerund direct object	May use either as direct object	Meaning changes with gerund or infinitive direct object
<i>agree (to go)</i>	<i>admit (going)</i>	<i>begin (to go) (going)</i>	<i>remember (to eat)</i>
<i>ask (to go)</i>	<i>avoid (going)</i>	<i>continue (to go) (going)</i>	<i>remember (eating)</i>
<i>decide (to go)</i>	<i>consider (going)</i>	<i>hate (to go) (going)</i>	<i>stop (to smoke)</i>
<i>prepare (to go)</i>	<i>enjoy (going)</i>	<i>like (to go) (going)</i>	<i>stop (smoking)</i>
<i>refuse (to go)</i>	<i>miss (going)</i>	<i>prefer (to go) (going)</i>	<i>forget (to finish)</i>
<i>want (to go)</i>	<i>suggest (going)</i>	<i>start (to go) (going)</i>	<i>forget (finishing)</i>

Object of a preposition

A noun can be the object of a preposition, creating a prepositional phrase: *for your help*. A gerund (but usually not an infinitive) can be the object of a preposition:

I thanked him for helping with the newspaper layout.
We talked about writing the blog post together.

However, there are two prepositions that require an infinitive as an object:

I never leave class early except to go to work.
I never leave class early but to go to work.

(*But* is more commonly used as a conjunction to join pairs of words, phrases, clauses, or sentences and to signal contrast. Here is it used as a preposition with a meaning similar to *except*.)

"Bare" infinitives

Sometimes we can omit *to* from an infinitive, resulting in a *bare* infinitive (also called the *base form* of the verb). For instance, verbs made with modals like *can*, *may*, *might*, *should*, or *would* are always followed by a bare infinitive, or base form. In these examples, omit the implied *to* when speaking or writing the sentence:

I may go with him (the complete verb is *may go*).
I might go with him (the complete verb is *might go*).

Here are other examples of bare infinitives:

His brother let him [to] drive. *We watched the bear [to] smash the trash can.*
Don't make me [to] laugh! *We felt the atmosphere [to] get tense.*
I didn't see anyone [to] take your flash drive. *We had better [to] wait for them.*

BTW—Infinitives as not-nouns, but as adjective complements

Although it is not a noun use, infinitives can be adjective complements similar in structure to noun complements (above). In this case, the infinitive follows an adjective and further focuses or defines it:

We were amazed to see how well she performed.
I was sad to hear of her illness.

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever



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