

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 doing the job of a direct object).

He loves **to play Minecraft** (infinitive doing the job of a 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 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 more infinitives acting as noun complements:

Abstract noun	Infinitive as Noun Complement
<i>suggestion</i>	Your suggestion to arrive early was good advice.
<i>decision</i>	Their decision to delay the wedding was not easy.
<i>opportunity</i>	You should take this opportunity to travel before looking for a job.
<i>reminder</i>	That's a reminder to return the library book.
<i>tendency</i>	She has a tendency to be late.

Direct objects

In the examples above, the gerunds and infinitives acted as subject or direct object. For 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).

You must use an infinitive after these verbs: **agree** (to go), **ask** (to go), **decide** (to go), **prepare** (to go), **refuse** (to go), **want** (to go).

You must use a gerund after these verbs: **admit** (going), **avoid** (going), **consider** (going), **enjoy** (going), **miss** (going), **suggest** (going).

You may choose either an infinitive or gerund with no change of meaning after these verbs: **begin** (to go, or begin going); **continue** (to go, or continue going), **hate** (to go, or hate going), **like** (to go, or like going), **prefer** (to go, or prefer going), **start** (to go, or start going).

For these verbs, the meaning changes depending on whether you follow with an infinitive or a gerund: *remember to eat, remember eating; stop to smoke, stop smoking; forget to finish, forget finishing.*

Object of a preposition

A noun can be the object of a preposition, creating a prepositional phrase: *for your help*. Similarly, 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. However, here it is 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**.
Don't make me [to] **laugh**.
I didn't see anyone [to] **take** your flash drive.
We felt the atmosphere [to] **tense**.
We had better [to] **wait** for them.*

BTW—Infinitives as adjective complements

Although it is not a noun use, infinitives also can be adjective complements similar in structure to the noun complements on the previous page. In an adjective complement, the infinitive follows and further focuses or defines an adjective:

*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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