

Using Infinitives and Gerunds

What is an infinitive?

An **infinitive** is the “to form” of a verb: *to run, to sleep, to watch*. These infinitives can function as adjectives, nouns, or adverbs.

Examples:

- *Adjective*: The best paper to write is about President Lincoln.
- *Noun*: The quickest way to get there is to drive.
- *Adverb*: Smokers find it very difficult to quit.

Infinitive phrases also serve as adjectives, nouns, and adverbs.

Examples:

- *Adjective phrase*: Traveling can sometimes create the impulse to paint something beautiful.
- *Noun phrase*: He loves to paint elaborate pictures.
- *Adverb phrase*: A painting is designed to make people think.

What is a gerund?

A **gerund** is the “-ing form” of a verb: *jumping, sleeping, reading*. Gerunds always serve as nouns.

Examples:

- *As the subject*: Sleeping is my favorite activity of the day.
- *As the object*: I don’t like shopping.

A **gerund phrase** serves the same function as a noun.

Examples:

- *Subject*: Sleeping in real late is the best part about Saturdays.
- *Object*: I have never liked shopping at the mall.

****Important Note**** Not all verb forms ending in -ing are gerunds. The word could also be a present participle, which serves as an adjective (eg. a *teaching* degree). The best way to determine whether the word is a gerund or a present participle is to see whether it serves as a noun or an adjective. If it is a noun, it is a gerund!

When to know which one to use?

(Information found in *The Everyday Writer, Second Edition*. Also, see *The Little, Brown Handbook* pp. 249-250; 288-290.)

Unfortunately, there is not a simple explanation to determine whether you should use an infinitive or a gerund; however, there are some helpful hints.

When to use infinitives:

Infinitives are typically used when representing intentions, desires, or expectations.

Examples:

- My advisor really wanted me to apply to several colleges.
- Today I decided to find a job.
- I expect to make good grades this year.

Take this sentence for example: Kelly was working as a waitress, but she *stopped to study* English.

When to use gerunds:

Gerunds tend to represent facts.

Example:

- Her writing a strong letter of recommendation made a big difference.

In this sentence, the gerund, *writing*, serves as the subject of the sentence, and it calls attention to the FACT that the letter was actually written. In contrast, if we were to use an infinitive instead, the sentence would be stating an expectation instead of a fact.

Example:

- To write a strong letter of recommendation would make a big difference.

Another rule for when to use gerunds is that any time you are following a preposition, you *always* use a gerund and never an infinitive.

Examples:

- The berries are alright for eating. [correct]
- The berries are alright for to eat. [incorrect]

The following verbs are followed only by gerunds, not by infinitives:

admit	discuss	finish	practice	resist
avoid	dislike	imagine	put off	risk
consider	enjoy	miss	quit	suggest
deny	escape	postpone	recall	tolerate