

Infinitives and Gerunds

What is an infinitive?

An **infinitive** is the “to” form of a verb (e.g., *to run, to sleep, to watch*). Infinitives can function as adjectives, nouns, or adverbs.

Examples:

- *Adjective*: The best paper to write is one about President Lincoln.
- *Noun*: The quickest way to get there is to drive.
- *Adverb*: Smokers find it 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.
- *Adverbial phrase*: A painting is designed to make people think.

What is a gerund?

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

Examples:

- *Subject*: Sleeping is my favorite activity of the day.
- *Object*: I do not like shopping.

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

Examples:

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

***Important Note:** Not all verb forms ending with “-ing” are gerunds. The word could also be a present participle, which serves as an adjective (e.g., 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

(See *A Writer’s Reference* (392-93) for in-depth information on gerunds and infinitives.)

Unfortunately, there is not a simple explanation to determine whether one 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:

- I decided to find a job.
- My advisor wanted me to apply to several colleges.
- I expect to make good grades this year.
- 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 calls attention to the **FACT** that the letter was 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, anytime one is following a preposition, *always* use a gerund and never an infinitive.

Examples:

- The berries are all right for eating. [correct]
- The berries are all right 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