

English grammar: Infinitive and Gerund

Bare infinitive (without to)

We usually use infinitives with to in the English language.

I want to go. I told him to come.

The infinitive without to (bare infinitive) is used as follows.

1. After modal verbs - can, may, must, needn't, dare ...

I can bring it. He may take it. You must buy it. We needn't open it. He dared not tell me.

The verbs *dare* and *need* can also be followed by the infinitive with to. In such sentences we use *do* to make questions and negatives.

I dared not call you. x I didn't dare to call you. These two sentences have the same meaning, only the form is different.

You needn't listen to him. (You don't have to listen to him.) x *You don't need to listen to him.* (There is no need to listen.) These two sentences are different in the form and meaning, too.

2. After the verbs of senses - feel, hear, see, watch.

We saw you swim. I heard her sing.

It is more common, however, to use *-ing* form in English after the verbs of senses.

We saw you swimming. I heard her singing.

But: In the passive voice the infinitive with to must be used after these verbs.

She was seen to cry.

3. After some more expressions - let, make, would rather, had better, help.

Don't let him go. She made me drive. I'd rather finish it. You'd better start. I helped them carry it.

The verb *help* can also be followed by the infinitive with to.

I helped them to carry it.

But the passive voice is followed by the infinitive with to.

I was made to drive. He was let to go.

Infinitiv or gerund?

In English some verbs are followed by infinitive (*They agreed to come*), other verbs are followed by gerund (*Did you enjoy flying?*) and there are also verbs followed by infinitive and gerund (*She began to work - She began working*).

1. The verbs followed by infinitive only.

agree	decide	hope	order	promise
allow	demand	instruct	permit	refuse
appear	encourage	invite	persuade	remind
arrange	fail	learn	plan	seem
ask	forbid	manage	prepare	swear
choose	force	offer	pretend	warn

He decided to study at university. We hoped to find it. Did he seem to like it? They allowed me to smoke. I ordered my son to send it.

2. The expressions followed by infinitive.

be about	make up one's mind	turn out
do one's best	set out	

He was about to start. I did my best to learn it. I haven't made up my mind to start yet. It turned out to be your car. We set out to cut the tree.

3. The verbs followed by gerund only.

admit	enjoy	forgive	mind	risk
consider	escape	imagine	miss	suggest
delay	excuse	insist	practise	understand
dislike	finish	keep	prevent	

She admitted telling him. Did you escape writing the test? I don't want to risk coming late.

Excuse, forgive and prevent are used with three different forms.
Excuse my being late. Excuse me being late. Excuse me for being late.

4. The expressions followed by gerund.

be against	can't help	look forward to
be interested in	care for	it's no use/good
can't stand	give up	it's worth

I can't stand waiting for hours. I can't help laughing. Don't give up studying this chapter. It's no use working so late. Is the film worth seeing?

5. The verbs followed by infinitives and gerunds.

A. With the same meaning.

begin	can't bear	allow	recommend	it requires
start	intend	permit	it needs	it wants
continue	advise			

Did you continue driving/to drive? He can't bear smoking/to smoke.

If the verbs *advise, allow, permit, recommend* are used with the indirect object, they are followed by infinitive. If not, gerund must be used.

They didn't allow us to eat there. They didn't allow eating there.

She recommended John to read this book. She recommended reading this book.

After the expressions *it needs/requires/wants* gerund is more common than infinitive.

The car needs washing/to be washed. The flower wants watering/to be watered.

B. The verbs that have a different meaning with infinitive or gerund.

Remember

I remember watching the match. It was fantastic. We use gerund to talk about earlier actions.

I remembered to watch the match. And so I sat down and switched on the TV. The infinitive is used to talk about following actions.

Try

I tried calling him because I needed to test my new mobile phone. I made an experiment with my mobile.

I tried to call him because I needed to meet him. I made an attempt to get in touch with him.

Love/like/hate/prefer

In the conditional tense these verbs are used with the infinitive.

I'd like to drive. I'd love to drive. I'd hate to drive. I'd prefer to drive.

In other tenses they are used with infinitives or gerunds, but both forms have a slightly different meaning.

I like driving. I love driving. I hate driving. I prefer driving.

I like to drive. I love to drive. I hate to drive. I prefer to drive.

Compare:

I like going to the cinema. (I enjoy it.)

I like to go to the dentist twice a year. (I don't enjoy it, but I go there, because it is good for my health.)

I hate ironing. (It is my least favourite activity. I never enjoy it.)

I hate to iron on Sundays. (I don't mind ironing, but not on Sundays.)

Go on

After dinner he went on showing us his photos.

The gerund is used when we want to say that a previous activity continues.

He gave us a lecture on the Greek history. And then he went on to show us his photos from Greece.

The infinitive is used when we want to describe an activity that follows a previous action and is somehow connected to it.

Stop

I stopped smoking. This means that I do not smoke anymore.

I stopped to smoke. I made a pause to have a cigarette.

Mean

I didn't mean to hurt you. I say that I didn't do it on purpose.

We can go to Spain. But it means spending more money. In this sentence we describe the consequences.

Be afraid

She was afraid of getting married. Any marriage is something that frightens her.

She was afraid to marry Bill. She doesn't mind getting married, but the marriage with Bill frightens her.

I'm sorry

I'm sorry for telling you. I apologize for a previous action.

I'm sorry to tell you that your flight will be delayed. I apologize for something that will happen.

The infinitive with this expression can also mean sorrow.

I'm sorry to hear that your wife is ill.

Note

There are a lot of verbs and expressions that are used with gerunds and infinitives. In this chapter we only tried to mention the most frequently used verbs.