



Gerund and Infinitive Worksheet

In this printable worksheet, the rules for using gerunds and infinitives will be explained in detail. The explanation will be followed by two practice activities with these grammar forms. Enjoy!

Rules for Using Gerunds and Infinitives to Describe an Action

In many English sentences, a main verb is used to describe an action. Take the sentence “I like swimming.” “Like” is the main verb, because it immediately follows the subject of the sentence “I.” “Swimming” is a verb too, but it’s not the main verb. It’s the action being described. In other words, “I like swimming” uses the verb “swimming” to describe an action that is “liked.” “I like to swim” also uses the main verb “like” to describe the action of swimming, but uses an infinitive instead of a gerund. So what’s the difference? Look at rules 1 through 3 below to find out.

Rule 1) Use a gerund when the action that is being described takes place *before* the main verb.

Example:

She remembers *eating* ice cream yesterday.

Explanation: The main verb here is *remember*, because it is what *she* (the subject) is doing. The action being described by the main verb is *eating*. The action of *eating* happens before *she* can *remember*. *Eating* must happen first, because you have to do something before you can *remember* doing it.)

Rule 2) Use a gerund when the action that is being described takes place *at the same time* as the main verb.

Example:

She enjoyed *eating* ice cream yesterday.

Explanation: The main verb here is *enjoyed*. Again, it’s the main verb because it is what *she*, the subject, is doing in the sentence. This time, however, the main verb was done at the same time as *eating ice cream*, the action being described.

This makes sense. You enjoy doing something when you do it, not before or after you do it. You can’t enjoy eating ice cream if you haven’t eaten it yet, and you can’t enjoy ice cream if it has already been eaten.

Rule 3) Use an infinitive when the action being described happens *after* the main verb.

Example: She likes *to eat* ice cream, so she’ll come to the ice cream shop with us.

Explanation: In the first clause in this sentence, *likes* is the main verb, while *to eat* is the action being described. Note that the second tense uses *will come*, a future tense verb, to describe a future trip to the ice cream shop. But she likes eating ice cream right now (and probably always likes eating ice cream, since the sentence is describing a preference).

In short, the main verb *likes* is happening in the present, but the described action *to eat* will happen in the future, after the main verb. Specifically, it will happen during a future trip to an ice cream shop.

Hopefully this helps you understand gerunds and infinitives a little better. Let me give a few more examples. Suppose you like watching movies. You would say “I like watching movies” if you are watching movies *right now*, or if you are fondly remembering movies you have enjoyed watching in the past.

If instead you want to imply that you are looking forward to watching movies in the future, you can say “I like to watch movies.” However, saying “I like to watch movies right now,” or “I like to watch movies last week” is incorrect grammar, and would not make sense to a native English speaker.

Gerunds, Infinitives, and Verbs-as-Nouns

Gerunds and infinitives are also commonly used in verbs that have been turned into nouns. This may sound a little strange. How does a verb turn into a noun? Allow me to explain.

Usually, a verb is used to describe what the subject of a sentence does. Examples of sentences with this pattern include “Cats like mice” and “Cats like chasing mice.” In the second sentence, “like” is the *main verb*, and “chasing” is the *action being described*. But both *like* and *chasing* describe what the *cats*, the subject of the sentence, do.

However, at other times, a verb can actually be the subject of a sentence or clause. When this happens, the verb behaves like a noun. Let’s look at some examples of this, with explanations.

- *To start* a fire is difficult if there are no matches.
Explanation: Here the verb *start* has been put into the phrase *to start a fire*. Because *to start a fire* is at the beginning of the sentence, and is followed by the verb *is* and the adjective *difficult*, *to start a fire* behaves like a noun phrase. You could substitute other noun phrases for *to start a fire* and the sentence would still have correct grammar. For example, you could say *This test is difficult* or *English is difficult*.
- *Starting* a fire is difficult if there are no matches
Explanation: Like in the previous example sentence, the verb *start* is the main word in the noun-phrase subject of the sentence.
- Everyone knows that *starting* a fire is difficult if there are no matches.
Explanation: In this sentence, the verb *start* is the subject of the clause *starting a fire is difficult if there are no matches*. *Everyone* is the subject of the sentence as a whole.

- Everyone knows that *to start* a fire is difficult if there are no matches.

Explanation: This sentence follows the exact same pattern as the previous example, with a verb as the subject of the clause. However, in this case, the verb *start* is an infinitive instead of a gerund.

These example sentences are all very similar, except that two of them use an infinitive and two use a gerund. How do you know when to use a gerund or an infinitive in the subject of a sentence or clause? Don't worry, the answer to this is simple. See Rule 4 below!

Rule 4) When using a verb in the subject of a sentence or clause, you can use either a gerund or an infinitive

Example A: *To build a house* takes a long time.

Example B: *Building a house* takes a long time.

Example C: I am aware that *to build* a house takes a long time.

Example D: I am aware that *building* a house takes a long time.

Explanation: In each sentence, the verb *build* is the main word in the subject of either the whole sentence or a clause in the sentence. As part of a noun phrase subject, *build* can be formed either as gerund *building* or infinitive *to build*.

A verb can also be turned into a noun when it is the object of a preposition. I'll give you a couple of examples below, again with explanations.

- She finds enjoyment in singing.

Explanation: The verb *sing* is the object of the preposition *in*.

- She thinks of *reading* books as fun.

Explanation: The verb *read* is the main word in the verb phrase *reading books* which is the prepositional object for *of*.

At this point, you may have already guessed the rule for using gerunds or infinitives in prepositional phrases:

Rule 5) If a verb is a prepositional object, it should be a gerund, not an infinitive.

Example: You may be thinking about *taking* the TOEFL exam.

Explanation: As part of the larger verb phrase *taking the TOEFL exam*, the verb *take* is the prepositional object of the preposition *about*. As a prepositional object, *take* must be expressed as the gerund *taking*.

So there you have it! You now have all the rules you need for common uses of “-ing” and “to...” verbs. Below are two activities where you can review these rules and practice using gerunds and infinitives.

Activity 1: *Underline the correct verb form for each sentence. In some cases, both the gerund (“-ing” verb) and the infinitive (“to...” verb) can be correct. Then give the reason for your choice or choices. An answer key appears on the final page of this worksheet.*

- 1) I am tired from (running/to run).
Reason for choice or choices:
- 2) My dog really enjoyed (chasing/to chase) rabbits when she was alive.
Reason for choice or choices:
- 3) I know that (washing/to wash) dishes isn't your favorite thing.
Reason for choice or choices:
- 4) (Making a movie/To make a movie) takes a lot of time and money.
Reason for choice or choices:
- 5) I want (going/to go) to the baseball game tomorrow, but I can't.
Reason for choice or choices:

Activity 2: *Write your own original sentences using gerunds and infinitives, as described below.*

- 1) A sentence where the activity being described takes place after the main verb (must use an infinitive):
- 2) A sentence where the activity being described takes place at the same time as the main verb (must use a gerund):
- 3) A sentence where the activity being described takes place before the main verb (must use a gerund):
- 3) A sentence where a gerund is the subject of the sentence:
- 4) A sentence where an infinitive is the subject of the sentence:
- 5) A sentence where a gerund is the subject of a clause within the sentence:
- 6) A sentence where an infinitive is the subject of a clause within the sentence:
- 7) A sentence where the verb is a prepositional object (must use a gerund):

Activity 1 answer key:

- 1) I am tired from (running/to run).
Reason for choice or choices: The underlined verb is a prepositional object, and must be a gerund.
- 2) My dog really enjoyed (chasing/to chase) rabbits when she was alive.
Reason for choice or choices: The underlined verb takes place at the same time as the main verb (enjoyed) and must be a gerund.
- 3) I know that (washing/to wash) dishes isn't your favorite thing.
Reason for choice or choices: The underlined verb is the subject of a clause, and can be either a gerund or an infinitive.
- 4) (Making a movie/To make a movie) takes a lot of time and money.
Reason for choice or choices: The underlined verb the subject of a sentence and can be either a gerund or an infinitive.
- 5) I want (going/to go) to the baseball game tomorrow, but I can't.
Reason for choice or choices: The underlined verb takes place after the main verb (want) and must be an infinitive.