

Infinitives

Summary: This handout provides a detailed overview (including descriptions and examples) of gerunds, participles, and infinitives.

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An infinitive is a verbal consisting of the word *to* plus a verb (in its simplest "stem" form) and functioning as a noun, adjective, or adverb. The term *verbal* indicates that an infinitive, like the other two kinds of verbals, is based on a verb and therefore expresses action or a state of being. However, the infinitive may function as a subject, direct object, subject complement, adjective, or adverb in a sentence. Although an infinitive is easy to locate because of the *to* + verb form, deciding what function it has in a sentence can sometimes be confusing.

- *To wait* seemed foolish when decisive action was required. (subject)
- Everyone wanted *to go*. (direct object)
- His ambition is *to fly*. (subject complement)
- He lacked the strength *to resist*. (adjective)
- We must study *to learn*. (adverb)

Be sure not to confuse an infinitive—a verbal consisting of *to* plus a verb—with a prepositional phrase beginning with *to*, which consists of *to* plus a noun or pronoun and any modifiers.

- **Infinitives:** *to fly, to draw, to become, to enter, to stand, to catch, to belong*
- **Prepositional Phrases:** *to him, to the committee, to my house, to the mountains, to us, to this address*

An Infinitive Phrase is a group of words consisting of an infinitive and the modifier(s) and/or (pro)noun(s) or noun phrase(s) that function as the actor(s), direct object(s), indirect object(s), or complement(s) of the action or state expressed in the infinitive, such as:

We intended to leave early.

The infinitive phrase functions as the direct object of the verb *intended*.

to leave (infinitive)
early (adverb)

I have a paper to write before class.

The infinitive phrase functions as an adjective modifying *paper*.

to write (infinitive)
before class (prepositional phrase as adverb)

Phil agreed to give me a ride.

The infinitive phrase functions as the direct object of the verb *agreed*.

to give (infinitive)

me (indirect object of action expressed in infinitive)
a ride (direct object of action expressed in infinitive)

They asked me to bring some food.

The infinitive phrase functions as the direct object of the verb *asked*.

me (actor or "subject" of infinitive phrase)
to bring (infinitive)
some food (direct object of action expressed in infinitive)

Everyone wanted Carol to be the captain of the team.

The infinitive phrase functions as the direct object of the verb *wanted*.

Carol (actor or "subject" of infinitive phrase)
to be (infinitive)
the captain (subject complement for Carol, via state of being expressed in infinitive)
of the team (prepositional phrase as adjective)

Actors: In these last two examples the actor of the infinitive phrase could be roughly characterized as the "subject" of the action or state expressed in the infinitive. It is somewhat misleading to use the word *subject*, however, since an infinitive phrase is not a full clause with a subject and a finite verb. Also notice that when it is a pronoun, the actor appears in the objective case (*me*, not *I*, in the fourth example). Certain verbs, when they take an infinitive direct object, require an actor for the infinitive phrase; others can't have an actor. Still other verbs can go either way, as the charts below illustrate.

Verbs that take infinitive objects without actors:

agree	begin	continue	decide
fail	hesitate	hope	intend
learn	neglect	offer	plan
prefer	pretend	promise	refuse
remember	start	try	

Examples:

- Most students *plan* to study.
- We *began* to learn.
- They *offered* to pay.
- They *neglected* to pay.
- She *promised* to return.

In all of these examples no actor can come between the italicized main (finite) verb and the infinitive direct-object phrase.

Verbs that take infinitive objects with actors:

advise	allow	convince	remind
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encourage	force	hire	teach
instruct	invite	permit	tell
implore	incite	appoint	order

Examples:

- He *reminded* me to buy milk.
- Their fathers *advise* them to study.
- She *forced* the defendant to admit the truth.
- You've *convinced* the director of the program to change her position.
- I *invite* you to consider the evidence.

In all of these examples an actor is required after the italicized main (finite) verb and before the infinitive direct-object phrase.

Verbs that use either pattern:

ask	expect	(would) like	want	need
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Examples:

- I *asked* to see the records.
- I *asked* him to show me the records.
- Trent *expected* his group to win.
- Trent *expected* to win.
- Brenda *likes* to drive fast.
- Brenda *likes* her friend to drive fast.

In all of these examples the italicized main verb can take an infinitive object with or without an actor.

Punctuation: If the infinitive is used as an adverb and is the beginning phrase in a sentence, it should be set off with a comma; otherwise, no punctuation is needed for an infinitive phrase.

- *To buy a basket of flowers*, John had to spend his last dollar.
- *To improve your writing*, you must consider your purpose and audience.

Points to remember

1. An infinitive is a verbal consisting of the word to plus a verb; it may be used as a noun, adjective, or adverb.
2. An infinitive phrase consists of an infinitive plus modifier(s), object(s), complement(s), and/or actor(s).
3. An infinitive phrase requires a comma only if it is used as an adverb at the beginning of a sentence.

Split infinitives

Split infinitives occur when additional words are included between *to* and the verb in an infinitive. Many readers find a single adverb splitting the infinitive to be acceptable, but this practice should be avoided in formal writing.

Examples:

- I like *to* on a nice day *walk* in the woods. * (unacceptable)
On a nice day, I like *to walk* in the woods. (revised)
- I needed *to* quickly *gather* my personal possessions. (acceptable in informal contexts)
I needed *to gather* my personal possessions quickly. (revised for formal contexts)