Verbals - Gerunds, Participles, and Infinitives

Summary:
These notes provide a detailed overview (including descriptions and examples) of gerunds, participles, and infinitives.

Gerunds

A gerund is a verbal that ends in -ing and functions as a noun. The term verbal indicates that a gerund, like the other two kinds of verbals, is based on a verb and therefore expresses action or a state of being. However, since a gerund functions as a noun, it occupies some positions in a sentence that a noun ordinarily would, for example: subject, direct object, subject complement, and object of preposition.

Gerund as subject:
- Traveling might satisfy your desire for new experiences. (Traveling is the gerund.)
- The study abroad program might satisfy your desire for new experiences. (The gerund has been removed.)

Gerund as direct object:
- They do not appreciate my singing. (The gerund is singing.)
- They do not appreciate my assistance. (The gerund has been removed)

Gerund as subject complement:
- My cat's favorite activity is sleeping. (The gerund is sleeping.)
- My cat's favorite food is salmon. (The gerund has been removed.)

Gerund as object of preposition:
- The police arrested him for speeding. (The gerund is speeding.)
- The police arrested him for criminal activity. (The gerund has been removed.)

A gerund phrase is a group of words consisting of a gerund and the modifier(s) and/or (pro)noun(s) or noun phrase(s) that function as the direct object(s), indirect object(s), or complement(s) of the action or state expressed in the gerund, such as:

The gerund phrase functions as the subject of the sentence.
Finding a needle in a haystack would be easier than what we're trying to do.

Finding (gerund)
a needle (direct object of action expressed in gerund)
in a haystack (prepositional phrase as adverb)

The gerund phrase functions as the direct object of the verb appreciate.
I hope that you appreciate my offering you this opportunity.
my (possessive pronoun adjective form, modifying the gerund)
offering (gerund)
you (indirect object of action expressed in gerund)
this opportunity (direct object of action expressed in gerund)

The gerund phrase functions as the subject complement.
   Tom's favorite tactic has been jabbering away to his constituents.

jabbering away to (gerund)
his constituents (direct object of action expressed in gerund)

The gerund phrase functions as the object of the preposition for.
   You might get in trouble for faking an illness to avoid work.

faking (gerund)
an illness (direct object of action expressed in gerund)
to avoid work (infinitive phrase as adverb)

The gerund phrase functions as the subject of the sentence.
   Being the boss made Jeff feel uneasy.

Being (gerund)
the boss (subject complement for Jeff, via state of being expressed in gerund)

Punctuation
A gerund virtually never requires any punctuation with it.

Points to remember:
1. A gerund is a verbal ending in -ing that is used as a noun.
2. A gerund phrase consists of a gerund plus modifier(s), object(s), and/or complement(s).

Participles
A participle is a verbal that is used as an adjective and most often ends in -ing or -ed. The term verbal indicates that a participle, like the other two kinds of verbals, is based on a verb and therefore
expresses action or a state of being. However, since they function as adjectives, participles modify nouns or pronouns. There are two types of participles: present participles and past participles. Present participles end in -ing. Past participles end in -ed, -en, -d, -t, -n, or -ne as in the words asked, eaten, saved, dealt, seen, and gone.

- The crying baby had a wet diaper.
- Shaken, he walked away from the wrecked car.
- The burning log fell off the fire.
- Smiling, she hugged the panting dog.

A participial phrase is a group of words consisting of a participle and the modifier(s) and/or (pro)noun(s) or noun phrase(s) that function as the direct object(s), indirect object(s), or complement(s) of the action or state expressed in the participle, such as:

- Removing his coat, Jack rushed to the river.

The participial phrase functions as an adjective modifying Jack.

Removing (participle)
his coat (direct object of action expressed in participle)

- Delores noticed her cousin walking along the shoreline.

The participial phrase functions as an adjective modifying cousin.

walking (participle)
along the shoreline (prepositional phrase as adverb)

- Children interested in music early develop strong intellectual skills.

The participial phrase functions as an adjective modifying children.

interested (in) (participle)
music (direct object of action expressed in participle)
early (adverb)

- Having been a gymnast, Lynn knew the importance of exercise.

The participial phrase functions as an adjective modifying Lynn.

Having been (participle)
**a gymnast** (subject complement for Lynn, via state of being expressed in participle)

**Placement:** In order to prevent confusion, a participial phrase must be placed as close to the noun it modifies as possible, and the noun must be clearly stated.

- *Carrying a heavy pile of books,* his foot caught on a step. *
- *Carrying a heavy pile of books,* he caught his foot on a step.

In the first sentence there is no clear indication of who or what is performing the action expressed in the participle carrying. Certainly foot can't be logically understood to function in this way. This situation is an example of a **dangling modifier** error since the modifier (the participial phrase) is not modifying any specific noun in the sentence and is thus left "dangling." Since a person must be doing the carrying for the sentence to make sense, a noun or pronoun that refers to a person must be in the place immediately after the participial phrase, as in the second sentence.

**Punctuation:** When a participial phrase begins a sentence, a comma should be placed after the phrase.

- *Arriving at the store,* I found that it was closed.
- *Washing and polishing the car,* Frank developed sore muscles.

If the participle or participial phrase comes in the middle of a sentence, it should be set off with commas only if the information is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

- *Sid,* **watching an old movie,** drifted in and out of sleep.
- *The church,* **destroyed by a fire,** was never rebuilt.

Note that if the participial phrase is essential to the meaning of the sentence, no commas should be used:

- The student **earning the highest grade point average** will receive a special award.
- The guy **wearing the chicken costume** is my cousin.

If a participial phrase comes at the end of a sentence, a comma usually precedes the phrase if it modifies an earlier word in the sentence but not if the phrase directly follows the word it modifies.

- The local residents often saw Ken wandering through the streets.
- (The phrase modifies Ken, not residents.)
- Tom nervously watched the woman, alarmed by her silence.
- (The phrase modifies Tom, not woman.)

**Points to remember**

1. A participle is a verbal ending in *-ing* (present) or *-ed, -en, -d, -t, -n,* or *-ne* (past) that functions as an adjective, modifying a noun or pronoun.
2. A participial phrase consists of a participle plus modifier(s), object(s), and/or complement(s).
3. Participles and participial phrases must be placed as close to the nouns or pronouns they
modify as possible, and those nouns or pronouns must be clearly stated.

4. A participial phrase is set off with commas when it:
   ○ a) comes at the beginning of a sentence
   ○ b) interrupts a sentence as a nonessential element
   ○ c) comes at the end of a sentence and is separated from the word it modifies.

**Infinitives**

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>agree</th>
<th>begin</th>
<th>continue</th>
<th>decide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fail</td>
<td>hesitate</td>
<td>hope</td>
<td>intend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learn</td>
<td>neglect</td>
<td>offer</td>
<td>plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prefer</td>
<td>pretend</td>
<td>promise</td>
<td>refuse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>advise</th>
<th>allow</th>
<th>convince</th>
<th>remind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>encourage</td>
<td>force</td>
<td>hire</td>
<td>teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>instruct</td>
<td>invite</td>
<td>permit</td>
<td>tell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>implore</td>
<td>incite</td>
<td>appoint</td>
<td>order</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ask</th>
<th>expect</th>
<th>(would) like</th>
<th>want</th>
<th>need</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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)