

[The Farlex Grammar Book](#) > [English Grammar](#) > [Parts of Speech](#) > [Verbs](#) > [Infinitives](#)

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Infinitives

What is an infinitive?

An **infinitive** is the most basic form of a verb. It is “unmarked” (which means that it is not conjugated for tense or person), and it is preceded by the **particle** *to*, as in *to run*, *to read*, *to swim*, etc.

Infinitives are known as **non-finite verbs**, meaning they do not express actions being performed by the subjects of clauses. Instead, infinitives function as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs to describe actions as ideas.

Infinitives are distinct from a similar construction known as **bare infinitives** or the **base forms** of verbs, which are simply infinitives without the particle *to*. Although nearly identical, we use them in different ways than “full” infinitives, which we’ll look at later in this section.

Using infinitives

Infinitives are used to express an action as a concept, rather than what is being done or performed by the subject of a clause. In this way, they can function as **nouns**, **adjectives**, or **adverbs**—that is, nearly any role in a sentence except that of a main verb.

Infinitives can stand on their own to complete these functions, or they can work together with their own **predicates** (any additional information that modifies or completes them) to form **infinitive phrases**. Infinitive phrases function as a nouns, adjectives, or adverbs as a single, holistic unit.

(In the examples in this section, infinitive phrases have been put in **bold**, while the infinitive verbs that begin them are in *italics*.)

Making infinitives negative

To make an infinitive or infinitive phrase negative, we use the word *not* before the infinitive. We can also put greater emphasis on *not* by placing it after *to*.*

(*This creates what is known as a **split infinitive**—an infinitive that has an adverb between *to* and the base form of the verb. While some traditional grammar guides state that this should never be done, in reality there is no such “rule” in English; it is perfectly grammatical to split an infinitive, and in many cases it sounds more natural to do so.)

Infinitives as nouns

Because infinitives and infinitive phrases can function as nouns, it means that they can be **the subject** of a clause, the **direct object** of a verb, or a predicate noun.

Subjects

The **subject** performs, occupies, or controls the action of the verb.

- “***To err*** is human; ***to forgive*** is divine.”
- “***To study mathematics at Harvard*** was her ultimate dream.”
- “***To live in the city*** means adjusting to a completely different lifestyle.”

Objects

As direct objects

A **direct object** is a person or thing that directly receives the action of the verb in a clause. An infinitive that acts as the object of another verb is sometimes known as a **verb complement**.

Remember that **intransitive verbs** do **not** take direct objects, so you will only find infinitives used as the objects of **transitive verbs**.

- "I'm not going unless you agree **to go with me**."
- "You appear **to be correct**."
- "Please be quiet; I'm trying **to study**."
- "They're attempting **to solve the equation**."
- "Let me know if you decide **to leave early**."
- "We hope **to go in the near future**."
- "We rarely manage **to get out of the house for the night**."

As objects in reported speech

When we use **reported speech**, we often use infinitives as the direct object of a "reporting verb" to express what was said or asked in the past. For example:

- "He asked **to help us fix the car**."
- "She said **not to answer the phone**."
- "He demanded **to speak to the manager**."
- "They offered **to take me to the airport**."
- "I promised **to buy her a diamond ring**."
- "He threatened **to report me to the police** if I didn't give him back the money."

As object complements

Certain verbs do not make sense with only a direct object, especially when that direct object is a person. More information is required about the object's relationship with the verb to form a complete thought. This extra information is known as the **object complement**.

An infinitive can also act as an **object complement**, which is word or group of words that describe, rename, or complete the direct object of the verb. For example:

- "I don't expect you **to approve of my decision**."
- "She's forcing me **to work through the weekend**."
- "We need you **to make a few more copies**."
- "Janet's father wants her **to go to Harvard**."
- "I would like the boss **to see these reports**."
- "He persuaded me **to marry him**."
- "They taught me (how) **to work the photocopier**."

We often use infinitives as object complements in reported speech to express what someone said **to** or asked **of** someone. For example:

- "He asked me **to help him**."
- "She told me **not to answer the phone**."

Gerunds vs. Infinitives

Certain verbs can take either **gerunds** or infinitives as direct objects. In some cases, this results in no difference in meaning. For example:

Infinitive	Gerund
"I like <i>to hike</i> on the weekend."	"I like <i>hiking</i> on the weekend."
"She loves <i>to read</i> ."	"She loves <i>reading</i> ."
"They hate <i>to get</i> bad news."	"They hate <i>getting</i> bad news."
"I prefer <i>to go out</i> on a Friday than <i>to stay</i> at home."	"I prefer <i>going out</i> on a Friday than <i>staying</i> at home."

In other instances, however, the meaning of the clause is significantly changed as a result. For instance, the verbs *remember*, *forget*, *try*, and *stop* can have both infinitives and gerunds as direct objects, but the meaning changes depending on which is used. For example

Infinitive	Gerund
"I remembered <i>to close</i> the window." (I didn't forget to do it.)	"I remember <i>closing</i> the window." (I clearly recall it.)
"I forgot <i>to meet</i> John earlier." (I didn't remember to do it.)	"I forget <i>meeting</i> John earlier." (I don't remember this fact even though it happened.)
"Try <i>to get</i> some rest." (Attempt to do this.)	"Try <i>getting</i> some rest." (Try this as a possible solution to the problem.)
"I stopped <i>to drink</i> water before bed." (I interrupted what I was doing to drink water.)	"I stopped <i>drinking</i> water before bed." (I don't drink water before bed anymore.)

Predicate nouns

Predicate nouns are a subset of a larger category known as **subject complements** (including **predicate pronouns** and **predicative adjectives**), which rename or re-identify the subject after a **linking verb** (usually a form of the verb *be*). For example:

- "All I want is *to be* left alone."
- "The best thing in life is *to spend* time with those you love."
- "The best we can hope for is *to break* even."

Infinitives as adjectives

When infinitives are used as adjectives, they function in a similar way to **relative clauses** (also known as **adjective clauses**), providing more information about a noun or pronoun that they appear directly after. For example:

- "This is a good place *to start* reading." (*To start reading* modifies the noun *place*.)
- "Give your brother something *to play* with." (*To play with* modifies the pronoun *something*.)
- "Find a friend *to help* you study." (*To help you study* modifies the noun *friend*.)

Infinitives as adverbs

We can also use infinitives as adverbs to modify the main verb in a sentence, describing a reason why an action is, was, or will be done. Infinitives used in this way are often known as **infinitives of purpose**. For example:

- "I started running *to improve* my health."

We can also use the phrases *in order* and *so as* to add formal emphasis to an infinitive of purpose, as in:

- "We must leave now *in order to catch* our train."
- "He's been studying all week *so as to improve* his grades."

Note that we do not use the preposition *for* before the infinitive; we only use *for* with a noun or noun phrase to create a **prepositional phrase** that modifies the verb to describe its purpose. Consider, for example, these three sentences:

- ✓ “I went to the supermarket **to buy some bread.**” (correct—infinitive phrase)
- ✓ “I went to the supermarket for some bread.” (correct—prepositional phrase)
- ✗ I went to the supermarket for to buy some bread.” (incorrect—preposition used with infinitive phrase)

Lone infinitives

We can also use infinitives in this way as isolated responses to questions asking *why* something is done or is the case. For example:

- Speaker A: “Why are you going to New York?”
- Speaker B: “**To see the Empire State Building.**”
- Speaker A: “Why did you turn on the TV?”
- Speaker B: “**To watch the news.**”

These responses are known as **elliptical sentences**, meaning that part of the sentence has been omitted because it is implied. In this case, the implied section is “because I wanted. . . .” As this element is implicitly understood, we often leave it out entirely and simply use the infinitive on its own.

Infinitives vs. Base Forms (Bare Infinitives)

The **base form** of a verb is simply the infinitive without the particle *to*—like an infinitive, it is uninflected for tense and person. Because of this similarity, the base form of a verb is often known as a **bare infinitive**, and some grammar guides and writers make little distinction between the two forms.

However, infinitives and base-form verbs function differently, so it is important to distinguish between them. An infinitive can be used in a sentence as a noun, an adverb, or an adjective, but it cannot act as a true verb that expresses the action of a subject.

The base form of a verb, on the other hand, can be used in conjunction with the **auxiliary verb** *do* to become negative or to form questions. They are also used with **modal auxiliary verbs** to express things like possibility, necessity, obligation and permission, as well as to create the simple future tense.

Verbs that take bare infinitives

The base form is also used after the direct object of certain action verbs, such as *let*, *help*, and *make*, as well as after **verbs of the senses**, such as *hear*, *see*, and *feel*.

Let’s look at some examples of these below. The bare infinitives (base forms) are in **bold**, while the main verbs are underlined and the direct objects are *italicized*:

- “Please let *me* **go** to the party, mom.” (Please give me permission to go.)
- “His father makes *him* **study.**” (His father forces him to study.)
- “Jack is helping *me* **clean** the garage.” (Jack is cleaning the garage with me.)
- “He heard *me* **shout.**” (He could hear that I was shouting.)
- “I saw *her* **look** in my direction.” (I could see that she was looking in my direction.)
- “I felt *him* **touch** my arm.” (I could feel that he touched my arm.)

(Note that these are not the only verbs that can be followed by bare infinitives.)

After *had better*

The base forms of verbs are also used after the phrase *had better*, which acts like the modal verb **should** to suggest a required or desirable action. For example:

- “You had better **clean** this up before your father gets home.”
- “I think we’d better **go** home soon.”

After *why*

Bare infinitives can also follow the word *why* to form questions, as in:

- “Why **study** when I already know the material by heart?”
- “Why **watch** TV when we could play outside?”

These types of questions are called **elliptical**, which, as we saw above, means that part of the sentence has been left out because it is implied. The full questions might read:

- “Why **should I study** when I already know the material by heart?”
- “Why **would we watch** TV when we could play outside?”

Since the italicized parts of these sentences can be implied, they are sometimes left out entirely.

Quiz

1. Which of the following is a distinguishing feature of **infinitives**?

- ☐ a) They cannot conjugate for tense or person
- ☐ b) They can function as a noun, adjective, or adverb
- ☐ c) They are preceded by the word *to*
- ☐ d) A & C
- ☐ e) B & C
- ☐ f) All of the above

2. Which of the following is **not** something an infinitive can function as?

- ☐ a) The subject of a clause
- ☐ b) The main verb of a clause
- ☐ c) The direct object of a verb
- ☐ d) An adverb modifying a verb

3. True or False: Infinitives and gerunds are always interchangeable as direct objects of verbs.

- ☐ a) True
- ☐ b) False

4. Identify the grammatical function of the infinitive phrase (in **bold**) in the following sentence:

“I need the employees **to work a little harder.**”

- ☐ a) Object complement
- ☐ b) Predicate noun
- ☐ c) Adjective
- ☐ d) Adverb

5. Which of the following distinguishes the **base form** of a verb from the **infinitive form**?

- ☐ a) It conjugates for tense or person
- ☐ b) It can function as a direct object of a main verb
- ☐ c) It is not preceded by the word *to*
- ☐ d) A & C
- ☐ e) B & C
- ☐ f) All of the above

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