Verbals: Gerunds, Participles, and Infinitives

Gerunds
A gerund is a verbal that ends in -ing and functions as a noun. Therefore, although it is based on a verb (and therefore expresses action or a state of being), it occupies the position in a sentence that a noun ordinarily would. For example:

Traveling might satisfy your desire for new experiences.  The gerund traveling indicates that the study abroad program might satisfy your desire for new experiences.

The police arrested him for speeding.  The gerund speeding indicates that the police arrested him for illegal driving practices.

* A gerund virtually never requires any punctuation with it.

Participles
A participle is a verbal that is used as an adjective and most often ends in -ing or -ed. Because it is based on a verb it expresses a state of action or being. However, since it functions as an adjective, a participle will modify a noun or pronoun. There are two types of participles: present participles which end in -ing and past participles which end in -ed, -en, -d, -t, or -n, such as asked, eaten, saved, dealt, and seen. For example:

The crying baby had a wet diaper.  The participle crying is an adjective modifying the noun baby.

Shaken, he walked away from the wrecked car.  The participle shaken is an adjective modifying the pronoun he and the participle wrecked is an adjective modifying the noun car.

Participle Phrases
A participle phrase is a group of words consisting of a participle and the direct object(s), indirect object(s), or complement(s) of the action or state expressed in the participle. For example:

Removing his coat, Jack rushed to the river.  The participle phrase removing his coat functions as an adjective modifying the noun Jack. Removing is the participle and his coat is the direct object of the action removing.

Jack introduced to music early develop faster.  The participle phrases introduced to music early functions as an adjective modifying the noun children. Introduced (to) is the participle, music is the direct object of the action introduced, and early is an adverb modifying the action introduced.

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

Carrying a heavy pile of books, his foot caught on a step.  This sentence reads as if his foot was carrying the books.

Carrying a heavy pile of books, he caught his foot on a step.  This sentence makes it clear that he was carrying the books and his foot caught on a step.
Punctuation and Participle Phrases
A participle phrase is set off with commas when it comes at the beginning of the sentence, interrupts the sentence with nonessential information, or comes at the end of the sentence separated from the word it modifies. Here is a closer look at these rules:

1. When a participle phrase begins a sentence, a comma should be placed after the phrase. For example:

   *Arriving at the store, I found that it was closed.*
   *Arriving at the store* is the participle phrase that starts the sentence. Note the comma following that phrase.

2. If the participle or participle 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. If the participle phrase could be theoretically removed from the sentence without changing the sentence’s meaning, it must be set off with commas. For example:

   *The church, destroyed by a fire, was never rebuilt.*
   *The participle phrase destroyed by a fire is not essential to the sentence’s primary meaning that the church was never rebuilt.*

   *The student earning the best grade will be rewarded.*
   *The participle phrase earning the best grade is essential to understanding the sentence’s meaning about who will be rewarded.*

3. If a participle 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 what it modifies. For example:

   *The local residents often saw Ken wandering the streets.*
   *The participle phrase wandering the streets modifies the noun Ken, which comes immediately before the phrase. Therefore, no comma is necessary.*

   *Tom nervously watched the woman, alarmed by her silence.*
   *The participle phrase alarmed by her silence modifies the noun Tom, which comes earlier in the sentence. Therefore, a comma is necessary to show that it modifies Tom and not the woman.*

Infinitives
An infinitive is a verbal that can function as a noun, adjective, or adverb. It consists of the word *to* and a verb in its simplest “stem” form. For example:

*To wait seemed foolish when quick action was required.*
*To wait is an infinitive functioning as a noun as the sentence’s subject.*

*He lacked the strength to resist.*
*To resist is an infinitive functioning as an adjective modifying the noun strength.*

*We must stay to learn.*
*To learn is an infinitive functioning as an adverb modifying the verb stay.*
**Infinitive Phrases**
An infinitive phrase is a group of words consisting of an infinitive and the direct object(s), indirect object(s), or complement(s) of the action or state expressed in the infinitive. For example:

I have a paper to write before class.  
*To write before class* is an infinitive phrase functioning as an adjective modifying the noun paper. *To write* is the infinitive and *before class* is a phrase modifying *to write*.

We intended to leave early.  
*To leave early* is an infinitive phrase functioning as the direct object of the verb intended. *To leave* is the infinitive and *early* is an adverb modifying *to leave*.

**Punctuation and Infinitive Phrases**
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. For example:

To buy a basket of flowers, John had to spend his last dollar.  
*To buy a basket of flowers* is an infinitive phrase starting this sentence. Note the comma following the phrase.

John had to spend his last dollar to buy a box of candy.  
*To buy a box of candy* is an infinitive phrase that is not at the beginning of a sentence. Note that there is no comma.

**Avoiding Split Infinitives**
Split infinitives occur when additional words are included between to and the verb in an infinitive. Although some readers find a single adverb splitting the infinitive to be acceptable, this practice should be avoided in all formal writing. For example:

I like to on a nice day walk in the woods.  
*To walk* is an infinitive that is split by the phrase *on a nice day*. This should be avoided.

On a nice day, I like to walk in the woods.  
To correct this sentence, one would move the phrase *on a nice day* in order to ensure that the infinitive *to walk* is not split.

I needed to quickly gather my possessions.  
*To gather* is an infinitive that is split by the adverb *quickly*. This should be avoided.

I needed to gather my possessions quickly.  
To correct this sentence, one would move the adverb *quickly* in order to ensure that the infinitive *to gather* is not split.

**Gerunds vs. Participles**
Sometimes the use of a gerund (used as a noun) or a participle (used as an adjective) can subtly change the meaning of a sentence. For example:

I was irritated by Bill’s constant interrupting.  
In this sentence, *interrupting* is a gerund (functioning as a noun). Here interrupting is clearly a specific behavior that irritates the speaker.

I was irritated by Bill, constantly interrupting.  
In this sentence, *interrupting* is a participle (functioning as an adjective modifying *Bill*). Here the cause of irritation is Bill, who just happens to be interrupting.
**Gerunds vs. Infinitives**

Gerunds always function as nouns, but infinitives can also serve as nouns. Confusion between gerunds and infinitives occurs primarily in cases in which one or the other functions as the direct object in a sentence. Some verbs take gerunds as verbal direct objects exclusively while other verbs take only infinitives as their direct objects. Some verbs can take either. Here is a brief list of verbs organized by which verbal direct object they take:

**Verbs that take only infinitives as verbal direct objects include:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Decide</th>
<th>Expect</th>
<th>Hesitate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learn</td>
<td>Need</td>
<td>Promise</td>
<td>Neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Want</td>
<td>Plan</td>
<td>Attempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Propose</td>
<td>Intend</td>
<td>Pretend</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I hope to go on a vacation soon. Here to go is an infinitive and hope is the verb indicating that the infinitive form must be used rather than the gerund going.

They agreed to sign the treaty. Here to sign is an infinitive and agreed is the verb indicating that the infinitive form must be used rather than the gerund signing.

**Verbs that take only gerunds as verbal direct objects include:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deny</th>
<th>Risk</th>
<th>Delay</th>
<th>Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can’t help</td>
<td>Keep</td>
<td>Give up</td>
<td>Be fond of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finish</td>
<td>Quit</td>
<td>Put off</td>
<td>Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postpone</td>
<td>Tolerate</td>
<td>Suggest</td>
<td>Stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regret</td>
<td>Enjoy</td>
<td>Keep</td>
<td>Dislike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admit</td>
<td>Avoid</td>
<td>Recall</td>
<td>Mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss</td>
<td>Detest</td>
<td>Appreciate</td>
<td>Recommend</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They always avoid drinking before driving. Here drinking is a gerund and avoid is the verb indicating that the gerund must be used rather than the infinitive to drink.

I recall asking her that question. Here asking is a gerund and recall is the verb indicating that the gerund must be used rather than the infinitive to ask.

**Verbs that can take either gerunds or infinitives as verbal direct objects include:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Start</th>
<th>Begin</th>
<th>Continue</th>
<th>Hate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prefer</td>
<td>Like</td>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Try</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remember</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

She has continued to work at the store. Here to work is an infinitive and continued is the verb indicating that either the infinitive or gerund would be correct.

She has continued working at the store. Here working is a gerund and continued is the verb indicating that either the gerund or infinitive would be correct.

They like to go to the movies. Here to go is an infinitive and like is the verb indicating that either the infinitive or the gerund would be correct.

They like going to the movies. Here going is a gerund and like is the verb indicating that either the gerund or the infinitive would be correct.

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This handout was adapted from the OWL at Purdue University website available at: [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_verbs.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_verbs.html)