Gerund and Infinitive Phrases

Gerunds and Infinitives are both verbals. A verbal is a word formed from a verb but functioning as a different part of speech, usually a noun. Gerunds are formed when an “-ing” ending is added to a verb, and every infinitive is composed of “to” plus a verb. When grouped with modifiers, gerunds and infinitives form verbal phrases that perform the function of nouns.

Using Gerunds in a Sentence
In the examples below, the gerund appears in italics and the main verb appears in bold.

Gerund as subject
Because gerunds act as nouns, they can take any role that a noun would usually take in a sentence. The most obvious role is the gerund as subject, in which the sentence is about an action:

Ex. Waking up early is always difficult.

Waking up early is the gerund phrase that forms the subject of the main verb is.

Gerund as a direct object
A gerund or gerund phrase can also be the object of a verb, making it the recipient of an action

Ex. Usually, my problem is staying up too late.

Staying up too late is the gerund phrase that functions as the object of the main verb is.

Gerund as the object of a preposition

Ex. Michael Phelps won the gold medal by training every day.

Training every day is the object of the preposition by and separate from the main verb won. Although gerund phrases do not require commas, if we were to rearrange our last example, a comma would be necessary.

Ex. By training every day, Michael Phelps won the gold medal.

It is important to remember, however, that the gerund phrase only gets a comma because it is part of an introductory prepositional phrase, not because it is a gerund.

Things to Remember

- While every gerund is a verb with an “-ing” ending, it does not act as the main verb of the sentence and usually acts as the subject or object of a sentence.
- Generally, gerunds do not require commas.
• Although a gerund phrase can function as the subject of a sentence, adding an “ing” to a verb does not make it a noun.

**Using Infinitives in a Sentence**

Infinitive verbal phrases are composed of “to” plus the verb and can act as a noun. Like gerunds, infinitive verbal phrases can function as subjects, objects, and complements in a sentence. However, when infinitive phrases are used as adverbs at the beginning of a sentence, they must be punctuated with a comma.

**Infinitive as a Subject**

Infinitives can function as subjects, but gerunds and gerund phrases take this role more commonly and usually sound more normal. Typically, an infinitive at the beginning of a sentence will be part of an adverbial phrase,

Ex. *To run seemed* dangerous given the conditions.

*To run* is the subject of the main verb *seemed*. This is correct, but “Running seemed dangerous given the conditions” sounds more natural.

**Infinitive as a Direct Object**

Infinitives are much more common as direct objects: “I want to…” is one of the most common examples. Place almost any verb after “to” in that sentence and you have a functional infinitive as a direct object. However, that is certainly not the only phrase to use this construction:

Ex. *Jim decided to take* the car for a test drive.

*To take* is the direct object of the main verb *decided*.

**Infinitive as an Adjective**

Unlike gerund phrases, infinitive phrases can be used as adjectives to modify a noun. In such a case, the infinitive phrase will follow the now

Ex. *I need a book to read on the beach*.

*To read on the beach* describes the noun “book,” which is the direct object of the main verb *need*.

**Infinitive as Part of an Adverbial Phrase**

When an infinitive is part of an adverbial phrase, the phrase usually answers the question “why?” for the verb.

Ex. *To see her face more clearly, Jenny cleaned the mirror*.

*To see her face more clearly* is the infinitive phrase and *cleaned* is the main verb. *When an infinitive phrase is used as an adverb* and *introduces your main clause, it should always be*
punctuated with a comma. However, when this sentenced is rearranged, we no longer need the comma.

Ex. Jenny cleaned the mirror to see her face more clearly.

It is common to see the phrase “in order” before this use of an infinitive, as in “Jimmy paraphrased the main points in the margin in order to learn quickly.”

Things to Remember
• Like gerunds and gerund phrases, infinitives and infinitive phrases are verbs that act as nouns in a sentence.
• Infinitives are composed of “to” plus the verb and can be the subject, object, or complement in a sentence.
• Infinitive phrases only require a comma when the infinitive phrase is used as an adverbial phrase and introduces the main clause.

Contact
Need more help with gerunds and infinitive phrases? Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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