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Gerunds and infinitives

A gerund is the -ing form of a verb used like a noun (enjoy swimming). An infinitive is to + the base verb (decide to leave). Each verb decides which one follows it, so you learn them in groups: enjoy, avoid and suggest take -ing; want, decide and hope take to; and every preposition takes -ing.

What to know

What are a gerund and an infinitive?

A **gerund** is the -ing form of a verb when it works like a noun. You can use it as the subject of a sentence or after certain verbs and prepositions. An **infinitive** is **to** plus the base verb: to study, to travel, to decide.

- *Cycling reduces traffic in city centres.* · gerund as the subject
- *Many students plan to study abroad.* · infinitive after plan
- *She is interested in learning Spanish.* · gerund after a preposition

Verbs that take the -ing form

After some verbs you must use the gerund. You cannot choose. These are the ones that appear most often in IELTS answers:

- enjoy, avoid, finish, mind, keep, practise, miss: She avoids travelling at rush hour.
- suggest, consider, recommend, admit, deny, risk: The report suggests building more cycle lanes.
- imagine, involve, mention, delay: Learning a language involves making mistakes.

Verbs that take to + base verb

After another group of verbs you must use the infinitive. These verbs are often about plans, wishes and decisions.

- want, need, hope, plan, decide, expect, choose: The city decided to ban cars from the centre.
- agree, refuse, promise, manage, afford, learn: Few families can afford to live in the city centre.
- seem, appear, tend, happen: Young people tend to use their phones for news.

Verbs that take either form

A few verbs take both with almost no change in meaning: like, love, hate, prefer, start, begin and continue. You can say **I prefer to work alone** or **I prefer working alone**.

Prepositions, purpose and the verbs make and let

After any preposition, use the gerund, even when the preposition is to. In **look forward to**, **be used to** and **object to**, the word to is a preposition, so the next verb ends in -ing: I look forward to hearing from you.

Exercises

1. Many students avoid _____ questions in large classes.
a. asking

b. to ask

c. ask

2. The council decided _____ a new cycle lane.

a. building

b. to build

c. build

3. I am looking forward to _____ my exam results.

a. to receive

b. receive

c. receiving

4. On the way home, Tom stopped _____ some milk because the fridge was empty.

a. buying

b. to buy

5. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) Many young people (2) enjoy (3) to use (4) social media every day.

6. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) The government (2) suggested (3) to introduce (4) a new tax.

7. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): is / environment. / It / to / important / the / protecting / protect

8. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): Worked / time. / saves / from / Working / home

9. Correct this: *I want go abroad to study.*

10. Correct this: *She is interested in to learn Japanese.*

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/gerunds-and-infinitives/practice/

IELTS tip. In Writing Task 2, a gerund is a tidy way to start a sentence about a general idea: Using public transport reduces pollution. Check every verb you use after suggest, avoid, enjoy and look forward to, because these mistakes are easy to see and easy to fix in your final read-through.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Gerunds and infinitives

AIM	Learners choose between gerund and infinitive by recognising verb groups and prepositions, and use both accurately in short spoken and written answers.
TIME	30 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Write ten verbs on the board (enjoy, want, avoid, decide, suggest, hope, finish, plan, mind, refuse). Learners sort them into two columns without help and compare, then you reveal the groups.

Lesson steps

1. Elicit the two forms and the three jobs of the gerund: subject, after verbs, after prepositions.
2. Run a pair 'sentence builder': one learner gives a verb card, the partner says a true sentence about their city or studies using the right form.
3. Teach the stop, remember and try contrasts with mime. Learners act the two meanings and a partner guesses the form.
4. Explain that to after look forward, be used and object is a preposition. Give a quick fix-it drill with five wrong sentences.
5. Learners write three Task 2 introduction sentences using suggest, avoid and decide, then swap and check.

Extension

Learners record a one-minute Speaking Part 2 answer about a plan for the future using at least four verbs from the lesson, then check the forms from a transcript.

Answer key

1. a) asking. Avoid is always followed by the -ing form. You cannot say avoid to ask.
2. b) to build. Decide takes the infinitive: decide to build.
3. c) receiving. In look forward to, the word to is a preposition, so the verb after it takes -ing.
4. b) to buy. Stopped to buy means he stopped walking in order to buy milk. Stopped buying would mean he no longer bought milk.
5. Part 3: *to use* → **using**. Enjoy is followed by the gerund: enjoy using.
6. Part 3: *to introduce* → **introducing**. Suggest is followed by -ing: suggested introducing.
7. It is important to protect the environment. After an adjective like important, the pattern is it is + adjective + to + base verb.

8. Working from home saves time. A gerund can be the subject of a sentence: Working from home saves time.
9. I want to go abroad to study. Want needs the infinitive with to: want to go.
10. She is interested in learning Japanese. After the preposition in, use the -ing form: interested in learning.

Questions learners often ask

What is the difference between a gerund and an infinitive? A gerund ends in -ing and works like a noun (swimming is fun). An infinitive is to + base verb (I want to swim). Which one you need depends on the word before it.

Is there a rule to know which verbs take -ing or to? There is no single rule, so learn the verbs in groups. Verbs about plans and wishes (want, hope, decide) take to. Verbs of liking, avoiding and suggesting (enjoy, avoid, suggest) take -ing.

Why is it look forward to meeting and not look forward to meet? Here to is a preposition, not part of an infinitive. Prepositions are always followed by a noun or an -ing form.

Can I use for + -ing to explain purpose? Usually not. Use to + base verb for purpose: I use a dictionary to check meanings. For + -ing describes what a thing is for, as in a knife is for cutting.

Sources

- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage, 4th edition. Oxford University Press.
- Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (2006). Cambridge Grammar of English. Cambridge University Press.

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