

Gerunds

Gerunds are the *-ing* forms of verbs that are functioning as nouns in a sentence. They show action or a state of being. For example, action can be shown with the gerunds “hiking,” “swimming,” or “studying”; state of being can similarly be demonstrated with gerunds like “refreshing” or “amusing.”

Gerunds also appear in gerund phrases, which combine the gerund with other words that add additional information. For example, the phrase “sprinting across the field” is a gerund phrase. Both gerunds and gerund phrases work the same way and have four variations in regard to how they function within a sentence: subject of the sentence, direct object of the sentence, subject complement, and object of a preposition.

The Different Kinds of Gerunds

Gerunds as the Subject of the Sentence

Gerunds can take on the role of the subject of a sentence.

- Bedtime is my favorite time of day. [**No Gerund**]
- **Sleeping** is my favorite activity. [**Gerund Included**]

“Sleeping” in the second sentence is a gerund that works as the subject of the sentence.

- Board games are a great way to spend an evening. [**No Gerund Phrase**]
- **Playing *Settlers of Catan*** is a great way to spend an evening. [**Gerund Phrase Included**]

In the second example, we’ve added a gerund phrase to replace the original subject of the sentence. “Playing” is the gerund, and “*Settlers of Catan*” adds additional clarifying information. Gerunds are useful ways to add specific, concrete information to your writing that will allow your readers to better understand the points or ideas you are describing.

Gerunds as the Direct Object of the Sentence

Gerunds can work as direct objects in a sentence. Direct objects are words or phrases that receive the actions performed by the verb.

- My dog likes naps. [**No Gerund**]
- My dog likes **napping**. [**Gerund Included**]

In the second sentence, the gerund “napping” tells us what the dog likes. “Napping” receives the action of “likes.” What does the dog like? The dog likes napping.

- My mom prefers classic noir films. [No Gerund Phrase]
- My mom prefers **watching classic noir films.** [Gerund Phrase Included]

In the second sentence, we've added in a gerund to make "classic noir films" into a complete gerund phrase. Again, we have included a more specific detail about what in particular my mom prefers: "watching."

Gerunds as the Subject Complement

Gerunds may also function as subject complements in sentences. Subject complements are words or phrases that rename the subject of the sentence or describe it with more details.

- The exam was difficult. [No Gerund]
- The exam was **frustrating.** [Gerund Included]

Both "difficult" and "frustrating" work as subject complements. They tell us what the exam *was*—in these cases, difficult and frustrating. While these two words may seem interchangeable, "frustrating" gives readers a more specific idea or mental image, while "difficult" can be unclear.

- The climb up the hill was a challenge. [No Gerund Phrase]
- The climb up the hill was **challenging to finish.** [Gerund Phrase Included]

Here, we've replaced "a challenge" with its gerund phrase equivalent as the subject complement of this sentence. We now know what specifically was challenging about the climb.

Gerunds as the Object of a Preposition

Finally, gerunds can be the object of a preposition. A preposition is a word or word phrase used before nouns or noun phrases to describe qualities such as direction, location, time, or spatial position. An object of a preposition is the word that comes after the preposition and describes the who, what, when, why, or how of that preposition. Prepositions can be difficult to learn, so if you want to review more information on this topic, check out our handouts here: [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#) [\[3\]](#) [\[4\]](#)

- I have to go home after my workout. [No Gerund]
- I have to go home after **exercising.** [Gerund Included]

In the second sentence, the gerund "exercising" helps tell us *when* specifically I will go home. When will I go home? After exercising.

- He got in trouble for incomplete work. [No Gerund Phrase]
- He got in trouble for **avoiding his work and not completing it.** [Gerund Phrase Included]

The second gerund phrase provides us with more details about what got him in trouble. Why is he in trouble? For avoiding his work and failing to finish it.

Dangling Gerunds

When using gerunds, we can run into trouble with *dangling gerunds*, also known as *dangling modifiers*.

- While playing video games, my mom said dinner was ready. [**Dangling Gerund**]
- While playing video games, *I heard* my mom say dinner was ready. [**Fixed**]
- *I heard* my mom say dinner was ready *while I was playing video games*. [**Fixed**]

The first sentence is confusing. This confusion is created because the noun phrase “my mom” follows the gerund phrase “while playing video games.” It makes it sound like “my mom” is the one playing video games, not me. To remove this confusion, we need to be explicit with the subject of our sentence, as shown in the first fix. In the second fix, we’ve rearranged the sentence to avoid the issue entirely.

Activity: Replacing Words with Gerunds

In the sentences below, replace a word or phrase with a gerund equivalent. Note that there may be more than one correct way to revise the sentence.

1. Nobody around here helps out with the chores.
2. My brother was a major irritation today.
3. A run is the best way to start my morning.
4. She enjoys her books.
5. Two of my favorite activities to do in the summer are swim and surf.
6. I’m the worst at sports.
7. He is nice.
8. I like food.

Possible Answers

1. Nobody around here helps out with the **cleaning**.
2. My brother was **irritating** today.
3. **Running** is the best way to start my morning.
4. She enjoys **reading**.
5. **Swimming and surfing** are two of my favorite activities to do in the summer.
6. I’m the worst at **playing baseball**.
7. He is **charming**.
8. I like **watching people cook** and then **eating all the delicious food after!**

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