

Infinitives

An **infinitive** is a *verbal*, a verb form or construction that plays the role of a different part of speech in a sentence. Although infinitives contain verbs, they cannot function as verbs. They do not convey a sense of *tense* on their own, and sentences containing them must include at least one finite main verb.

Forming the Infinitive

Infinitives are formed by placing *to* in front of the base form of a verb. They are negated by placing *not* in front of them.

<i>to write</i>	<i>not to write</i>
<i>to read</i>	<i>not to read</i>
<i>to sleep</i>	<i>not to sleep</i>

Functions

The infinitive has many functions. It can be helpful to identify what role an infinitive plays in a sentence: with the proper understanding of how an infinitive is used, writers can structure their sentences with clarity and precision.

As a Noun

An infinitive can act as a noun, appearing as the **subject** or **direct object** of a sentence. It can also appear as a **subject complement**, which provides information about the subject, following a linking verb (such as *is*) in the predicate of a sentence.

One way to test whether or not an infinitive is acting as a noun is by replacing the infinitive with the word *something*.

Subject: *To dream* requires incredible courage. [Something requires courage.]

Direct object: He wanted *to cry*. [He wanted something.]

Subject complement: Our aim is *to improve*. [Our aim is something.]

As an Adjective

Infinitives can also be placed after any noun in a sentence, acting as an adjective.

Describing a Subject: The best person *to consult* is your counselor [whom you should consult].

Describing an Object: The teacher assigned several exercises *to complete* [exercises that must be completed].

As an Adverb

Infinitives can also be adverbial, modifying any verb in a sentence. These infinitives tell the reader *why* the action is necessary. Note that the infinitive can either precede or follow the main clause of a sentence: it is movable.

Before Main Clause: *To do well in college*, one must study diligently.

After Main Clause: We tell stories *to teach lessons*.

Infinitive Phrases

Infinitives can be combined with other words and phrases to provide additional information about the action expressed in the infinitive.

San José State University teaches students *to think critically*.

Here, the adverb “critically” describes **how** SJSU teaches its students to think.

In the example above, “students” is the actor of the infinitive phrase: they are taught (by SJSU) *to do something (to think critically)*. Without an actor, the main subject of the sentence is also the implied actor of the infinitive phrase.

The scientists promised *to build* jetpacks before the end of the century.

This can be thought of as a shorthand relative clause: “The scientists promised *that they would build* jetpacks before the end of the century.”

Bare Infinitives

When used with certain verbs, the word *to* is dropped from an infinitive.

With Modal Verbs

Bare infinitives are always used with the modal verbs *can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, and would*. These verbs combine with infinitives to express *the conditional mood*, which conveys a sense of necessity or possibility. The combination of a modal verb and a bare infinitive can take the place of the main verb of a sentence.

We must (*to*) *search* for alternative energy sources.

There might (*to*) *be* a better course of action.

Special Cases

The verbs *bid, let, watch, see, make, help, and hear* take bare infinitives. The constructs *had better* and *had rather* (an archaic form of “would rather,” an expression of preference commonly used in British English) also take bare infinitives.

This will help *(to) wash* out the stain.
The whole family heard her *(to) sing* the National Anthem.
You *had better (to) speak* your mind before it's too late.
I *had rather* you not *(to) disturb me* while I work.

Lastly, the verbs *dare* and *need* can take bare infinitives under certain circumstances.

Interrogative: How dare you *(to) defy* my orders? *Need I (to) ask* why you disobey me?
Negative: I *dare not (to) invade* your privacy. You *need not (to) worry*.
“Dare say”: I *dare (to) say* [I suppose] our future looks bright.

Split Infinitives

When a word or phrase appears between *to* and the verb in an infinitive, it is called a *split infinitive*. They are considered by some grammarians to be improper and should be avoided in formal writing. Revise split infinitives whenever they make the sentence difficult to understand.

At the apex of its ascent, the falcon stopped *to swiftly and suddenly* dive at its prey.
Revision: At the apex of its ascent, the falcon stopped *to dive swiftly and suddenly* at its prey.

A split infinitive containing a single adverb is acceptable in informal contexts, especially when moving the adverb makes the sentence awkward or unclear.

To properly prepare for my presentation, I must research both sides of the debate.
“*To prepare properly* for my presentation...” removes the emphasis on **properly**.
“*To prepare* for my presentation, I must **properly** research...” emphasizes the wrong verb.

Other Forms

The infinitive has four other forms: the **perfect infinitive**, the **continuous infinitive**, the **perfect continuous infinitive**, and the **passive infinitive**. These are formed by using several different verb tenses with auxiliary verbs after the *to*.

Perfect Infinitive

Perfect infinitives are used with other verbs to convey the *conditional mood*. They are most often combined with modal verbs. Perfect infinitives are formed by changing the base form of a verb to its past participle and adding the auxiliary verb *have*.

I would love *to have been* famous by now.
She wished *to have tried* her best.
My package *should have arrived* yesterday.
To have lived is a wonderful thing.

Continuous Infinitive

Continuous infinitives combine with other verbs to express a continuing action. They are formed by combining *to be* with the present participle of a verb.

Their souls are said *to be wandering* around for eternity.
You *should be studying* for the test!
It is nice *to be working* on my novel after so long.
The cat seemed *to be waiting* for the right moment to strike.

Perfect Continuous Infinitive

The perfect continuous infinitive is a combination of the perfect and continuous forms. It expresses a continuing action that is now complete. The perfect continuous infinitive is formed by combining *to have been* with the present participle of a verb.

I must *have been dreaming* of summer vacation.
This student appeared *to have been dozing* off in class.

Passive Infinitive

The passive infinitive is used with other verbs to express an action received by the subject of a sentence. It is formed by combining *to be* with the past participle of a verb.

The workers simply wish *to be rewarded* for their efforts.
Hygiene needs *to be prioritized*.

Activity 1: Main Verbs and Infinitives

Identify the subject of each sentence and its main verb, as well as any infinitives that may be present. Underline the subject and main verb, then highlight and label infinitive forms: *bare*, *split*, *perfect*, *continuous*, *perfect continuous*, and *passive*.

Example: “The quick, brown fox jumped to abruptly overtake the lazy dog.”
subject + main verb split infinitive

1. Although the workers fought to be granted better conditions, their employers decided to drastically cut their pay.
2. Rumors of your legendary moves seem to have been circulating about the dance floor.
3. That gambler must have met Lady Luck herself to have beaten those odds.
4. A mother watches her children grow up and venture out into the world.
5. The effects of sleep deprivation appeared to be catching up to him.

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