

The Infinitive

Recognize an *infinitive* when you see one.

To sneeze, to smash, to cry, to shriek, to jump, to dunk, to read, to eat, to slurp—all of these are infinitives. An infinitive will almost always begin with **to** followed by the simple form of the verb, like this:

TO + **VERB** = infinitive

Important Note: Because an infinitive is *not* a verb, you *cannot* add **s**, **es**, **ed**, or **ing** to the end. Ever!

Infinitives can be used as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs. Look at these examples:

To sleep is the only thing Eli wants after his double shift waiting tables at the neighborhood café.

To sleep functions as a noun because it is the subject of the sentence.

No matter how fascinating the biology dissection is, Emanuel turns his head and refuses *to look*.

To look functions as a noun because it is the direct object for the verb *refuses*.

Wherever Melissa goes, she always brings a book *to read* in case conversation lags or she has a long wait.

To read functions as an adjective because it modifies *book*.

Richard braved the icy rain *to throw* the smelly squid eyeball stew into the apartment dumpster.

To throw functions as an adverb because it explains *why* Richard braved the inclement weather.

Recognize an infinitive even when it is missing the **to**.

An infinitive will almost always begin with **to**. Exceptions do occur, however. An infinitive will lose its **to** when it follows certain verbs. These verbs are **feel**, **hear**, **help**, **let**, **make**, **see**, and **watch**.

The pattern looks like this:

SPECIAL VERB + **DIRECT OBJECT** + **INFINITIVE** - **TO**

Here are some examples:

As soon as Theodore ***felt the rain splatter*** on his hot, dusty skin, he knew that he had a good excuse to return the lawn mower to the garage.

Felt = special verb; ***rain*** = direct object; ***splatter*** = infinitive minus the ***to***.

When Danny ***heard the alarm clock buzz***, he slapped the snooze button and burrowed under the covers for ten more minutes of sleep.

Heard = special verb; ***alarm clock*** = direct object; ***buzz*** = infinitive minus the ***to***.

Although Dr. Ribley spent an extra class period ***helping us understand*** logarithms, we still bombed the test.

Helping = special verb; ***us*** = direct object; ***understand*** = infinitive minus the ***to***.

Because Freddie had never touched a snake, I removed the cover of the cage and ***let him pet*** Squeeze, my seven-foot python.

Let = special verb; ***him*** = direct object; ***pet*** = infinitive minus the ***to***.

Since Jose had destroyed Sylvia's spotless kitchen while baking chocolate-broccoli muffins, she ***made him take*** her out for an expensive dinner.

Made = special verb; ***him*** = direct object; ***take*** = infinitive minus the ***to***.

I said a prayer when I ***saw my friends mount*** the Kumba, a frightening roller coaster that twists and rolls like a giant sea serpent.

Saw = special verb; ***my friends*** = direct object; ***mount*** = infinitive minus the ***to***.

Hoping to lose her fear of flying, Rachel went to the airport to ***watch passenger planes take off and land***, but even this exercise did not convince her that jets were safe.

Watch = special verb; ***passenger planes*** = direct object; ***take, land*** = infinitives minus the ***to***.

To split or not to split?

The general rule is that no word should separate the ***to*** of an infinitive from the simple form of the verb that follows. If a word does come between these two components, a split infinitive results. Look at the example that follows:

Wrong:

Sara hopes *to quickly finish* her chemistry homework so that she can return to the more interesting Stephen King novel she had to abandon.

Right:

Sara hopes *to finish* her chemistry homework *quickly* so that she can return to the more interesting Stephen King novel she had to abandon.

Some English teachers believe that *thou shall not split infinitives* was written on the stone tablets that Moses carried down from the mountain. Breaking the rule, in their eyes, is equivalent to killing, stealing, coveting another man's wife, or dishonoring one's parents. If you have this type of English teacher, then don't split infinitives!

Other folks, however, consider the split infinitive a *construction*, not an error. They believe that split infinitives are perfectly appropriate, especially in informal writing.

In fact, an infinitive will occasionally require splitting, sometimes for meaning and sometimes for sentence cadence. One of the most celebrated split infinitives begins every episode of *Star Trek*: "**To boldly go** where no one has gone before" Boldly to go? To go boldly? Neither option is as effective as the original!

When you are making the decision to split or not to split, consider your audience. If the piece of writing is very formal and you can maneuver the words to avoid splitting the infinitive, then do so. If you like the infinitive split and know that its presence will not hurt the effectiveness of your writing, leave it alone.



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The Infinitive Phrase

Recognize an *infinitive phrase* when you see one.

An infinitive phrase will begin with an infinitive [**to** + simple form of the verb]. It will include objects and/or modifiers. Here are some examples:

To smash a spider

To kick the ball past the dazed goalie

To lick the grease from his shiny fingers despite the disapproving glances of his girlfriend Gloria

Infinitive phrases can function as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs. Look at these examples:

To finish her shift without spilling another pizza into a customer's lap is Michelle's only goal tonight.

To finish her shift without spilling another pizza into a customer's lap functions as a noun because it is the subject of the sentence.

Lakesha hopes ***to win the approval of her mother*** by switching her major from fine arts to pre-med.

To win the approval of her mother functions as a noun because it is the direct object for the verb ***hopes***.

The best way ***to survive Dr. Peterson's boring history lectures*** is a sharp pencil to stab in your thigh if you catch yourself drifting off.

To survive Dr. Peterson's boring history lectures functions as an adjective because it modifies ***way***.

Kelvin, an aspiring comic book artist, is taking Anatomy and Physiology this semester ***to understand the interplay of muscle and bone in the human body***.

To understand the interplay of muscle and bone in the human body functions as an adverb because it explains ***why*** Kelvin is taking the class.

Punctuate an infinitive phrase correctly.

When an infinitive phrase introduces a main clause, separate the two sentence components with a comma. The pattern looks like this:

INFINITIVE PHRASE + , + **MAIN CLAUSE** .

Read this example:

To avoid burning another bag of popcorn, Brendan pressed his nose against the microwave door, sniffing suspiciously.

When an infinitive phrase breaks the flow of a main clause, use a comma both before and after the interrupter. The pattern looks like this:

START OF MAIN CLAUSE + , + **INTERRUPTER** + , + **END OF MAIN CLAUSE** .

Here is an example:

Those basketball shoes, *to be perfectly honest*, do not complement the suit you are planning to wear to the interview.

When an infinitive phrase concludes a main clause, you need no punctuation to connect the two sentence parts. The pattern looks like this:

MAIN CLAUSE + Ø + **MAIN CLAUSE** .

Check out this example:

Janice and her friends went to the mall *to flirt with the cute guys who congregate at the food court*.



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Lesson 21

Infinitives and Infinitive Phrases

An **infinitive** is a verb form usually preceded by the word *to*. In this case, *to* is not a preposition, but a part of the infinitive verb form. An infinitive can be used as a noun, an adjective, or an adverb.

I love **to gather** flowers in the spring. (infinitive as a noun)

Our plans **to visit** Civil War battlefields changed drastically. (infinitive as an adjective)

Your address is difficult **to remember**. (infinitive as an adverb)

An **infinitive phrase** includes an infinitive and any complements and modifiers needed to complete its meaning.

Many animals can learn **to recognize people**.

► **Exercise 1** Above each infinitive, write *n* if it is used as a noun, *adj.* if it is used as an adjective, and *adv.* if it is used as an adverb.

adj.

Choosing a setting for a novel is not a decision to make hastily.

1. An author must choose the right setting to make a novel memorable.
2. For some writers, it was easy to find the best setting.
3. To live in London is to have the perfect setting.
4. A novelist can find it interesting to create plots based on the city's rich history.
5. As the center of government, it is the place to witness politics in action.
6. To see a great opera, one would also travel to London.
7. To shop, a character would head for Oxford Street.
8. There are many parks for a hero or heroine to walk through.
9. To visit the oldest royal park, one would go to St. James's.
10. At Regent's Park it is fun to view the Zoological Gardens.
11. At Trafalgar one likes to admire the statue of Lord Nelson, the hero of the battle of Trafalgar.
12. Perhaps the character to write about is Lord Nelson.
13. In his day, the place to be was a London district called Mayfair.
14. The author to read was Jane Austen.
15. To purchase one of Miss Austen's books, one went to Hatchard's on Piccadilly.