



Helpful Guidelines in Selecting Gerunds vs. Infinitives

by Philip Suarez

Correctly choosing a gerund or infinitive form after a given verb can be a frustrating challenge for many students. They are often told to memorize long lists of combinations, and when they can't remember them, they guess blindly. This can be particularly problematic for students since many world languages, such as Spanish and French, only use infinitives directly after a main verb. When learning a foreign language, students become accustomed to using grammatical rules to choose correct verb forms. However, no such grammatical rules exist to help English language learners choose between a gerund or infinitive form to follow a verb.

The absence of any syntactic rationale for choosing the correct verb form in this environment raises the possibility that the correct combinations are not predictable and are only a result of historical development. This possibility seems counter-intuitive, however, given the relative ease with which native English speaking children acquire the correct forms. The purpose of this article is to explain the choice of gerunds vs. infinitives after a given verb by using a semantic model rather than a syntactic one. The main hypothesis to be taken up is that verbs that are followed by a gerund or infinitive can be analyzed as introducing actions or states that pertain to specific categories of meaning. These semantic categories are relatively few in number, and they determine the choice of using a gerund or infinitive after the verb. Two key guidelines – shown below – can remove some of the mystery of these word forms and enable our students to make their selections more systematically.

The Guidelines

1. When the verb is followed by a gerund, the gerund describes a process, an activity, an action in progress, or a quick action. What is important is that the gerund does not describe any success, failure or change; it just describes the process, activity or action itself.
2. When the verb is followed by an infinitive, the infinitive describes a goal that is either completed or not completed, or it describes an action or situation that is either completed or not completed. The infinitive describes something that succeeded, failed or changed in some way.

Applications of the Guidelines**Four categories of verbs that must be followed by a gerund****1a. Meaning or use: *negative mood; ending***

Explanation: These verbs introduce an action or situation that the speaker considers to be bad, wrong, undesirable, not happening as soon as planned, or coming to an end.

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| (1) admit | Later, he finally admitted stealing the money from the store. |
| (2) avoid | You should avoid spending too much with credit cards. |
| (3) delay | They're going to delay playing football because of the heavy rain. |
| (4) deny | He denied stealing the money from the store. |
| (5) dislike | I dislike watching detective movies. |
| (6) finish | He will finish writing the essay tomorrow. |
| (7) miss | If I don't go home, I'll miss watching my favorite TV show. |
| (8) quit | She quit smoking. |
| (9) postpone | I'm busy at work, so I'll have to postpone going on vacation. |
| (10) regret | She regrets marrying when she was so young. |

1b. Meaning or use: *discussion; investigation*

Explanation: These verbs introduce an action or situation that is under discussion or investigation, but no decision has been made yet.

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| (1) consider | The company considered hiring a new manager. |
| (2) contemplate | They contemplated moving to another country. |
| (3) discuss | We should discuss starting our own business. |
| (4) mention | My sister mentioned having a birthday party for our parents. |
| (5) recommend | My adviser recommends taking another English course. |
| (6) suggest | The representative suggested leaving on an earlier flight. |
| (7) think about | I'll think about registering for a more advanced course. |

(use gerunds for all phrasal verbs)

1c. Meaning or use: *polite conversation*

Explanation: These verbs introduce an action or situation, often positive or pleasant, which is the topic of polite conversation.

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| (1) appreciate | I always appreciate knowing about your plans in advance. |
| (2) enjoy | We enjoy going to the beach because it's so close. |
| (3) imagine | I imagine buying a larger house someday. |
| (4) mind (<i>for questions</i>) | Do you mind cooking dinner tonight? |
| (5) mind (<i>for negatives</i>) | He doesn't mind getting up early in the morning. |

1d. Meaning or use: *in progress*

Explanation: These verbs introduce an action or situation that is now in progress or was stopped, but is in progress again.

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| (1) keep | Keep working. |
| (2) keep on | Keep on working. |
| (3) practice | She practices playing piano every Saturday. |
| (4) resume | We'll resume reading this chapter next week. |

Five categories of verbs that must be followed by an infinitive**2a. Meaning or use: *goal-oriented***

Explanation: These verbs introduce an action or situation that is a goal, although it hasn't happened yet.

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| (1) agree | I agreed to register for the more advanced English class. |
| (2) decide | He decided to find another job. |
| (3) expect | She expects to visit her mother in Haiti next year. |
| (4) hope | I hope to graduate next spring. |
| (5) intend | He intends to visit Colombia next year. |
| (6) offer | They offered to drive her to the hospital. |
| (7) plan | We plan to move to California next year. |
| (8) promise | We promised to go to their wedding in New York. |
| (9) urge | We urged him to quit smoking. |
| (10) want | He wants to buy a new car. |
| (11) would like | I would like to learn French. |

2b. Meaning or use: *hypothetical; imaginary*

Explanation: These verbs introduce an action or situation that is not real; or they introduce an action or situation that is possible or potential, but not certain.

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| (1) appear | The economy appears to improve as the year comes to an end. |
| (2) pretend | The children pretended to be rock singers. |
| (3) seem | They seem to be good parents. |
| (4) threaten | He threatened to quit his job if he didn't get a raise. |

2c. Meaning or use: *reported speech*

Explanation: These verbs introduce an action that someone has requested or demanded. They report what someone said.

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| (1) advise* | The counselor advised him to take a more advanced class. |
| (2) ask* | We asked the neighbors to turn down the music. |
| (3) encourage* | We encouraged everyone to come to the Christmas party. |
| (4) order* | The officer ordered the soldiers to return to the army base. |
| (5) remind* | I reminded her to buy a birthday present for her mother. |
| (6) say | Their teacher said to read the next chapter. |
| (7) tell* | We told them to visit us more often. |
| (8) warn* | The government warned everyone to prepare for the hurricane. |

* Requires a direct object

2d. Meaning or use: *authority*

Explanation: These verbs introduce an attempt to direct the actions or behavior of others.

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| (1) allow* | The government allowed them to apply for residency. |
| (2) force * | His mother-in-law always forces him to help wash the dishes. |
| (3) permit * | Her parents permitted her to stay out until 11:00. |
| (4) require * | That elementary school requires students to wear uniforms. |

* Requires a direct object

2e. Meaning or use: *uncompleted*

Explanation: These verbs introduce an action or situation that has not been completed or has been aborted for some reason.

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| (1) fail | They failed to raise enough money to buy the house. |
| (2) need | She needs to improve her English before she can get her degree. |
| (3) refuse | He refused to betray his friend. |

Concluding Remarks

The use of gerunds and infinitives after a verb, like any component of language, must be systematic in order to function. In order to be systematic, the choice of using a gerund or infinitive after a given verb must be predictable and consistent. If this component of English were not systematic, native speakers would find it difficult or impossible to acquire the correct forms for the vast number of possible combinations. Students who learn a foreign language depend on rules that are most often based on syntax, morphology and phonology. For example, the *-ed* past tense ending represents a

single morphophoneme, but it can be pronounced as /d/, /t/ or /əd/depending on phonological information for the last phoneme of the verb in question. Similarly reliable are syntactic rules that generate one pattern for questions and negatives when the main verb is *be* (e.g., *Are you?* and *I'm not.*) and another pattern for all other verbs (e.g., *Do you understand?* and *I don't understand.*)

In the absence of data from syntax, morphology and phonology, students need to be aware that certain components of English function in accordance with semantic categories. The data in the discussion above reveal a very manageable set of semantic categories: four categories for gerunds and five for infinitives. Once instructors appreciate the benefit of teaching gerunds and infinitives in conjunction with the semantic categories that control their use, they can then develop exercises and assessments that make use of these categories. The semantic component of language offers a method of scaffolding ESL instruction for one of the more difficult elements of English. Instead of randomly fumbling their way to a better understanding of gerunds and infinitives, students have usable semantic guidelines available to them.

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