

Verbals

Words or phrases that look like verbs (or are verbs, but that's not the tricky part for most people, so we'll skip it) but are doing other jobs when used in phrases, clauses, or sentences

Gerunds: -ing forms that are acting like nouns or adjectives

Used as a noun (subject): Swimming is what I do on Saturdays.

Used as an adjective: A rolling stone gathers no moss.

The tricky part: must distinguish between a gerund used as a predicate nominative or predicate adjective and a third-person singular present continuous verb:

Used as a predicate adjective: She is smashing in her new T-shirt.

Used as a present continuous verb: She is smashing all of the windows in her new T-shirt.

There are contexts that could make the first example a present continuous verb, but without making up a whole story, the easiest analysis is predicate adjective. (But feel free to make up a whole story.)

Participles: -ed forms (or other forms, if the verbs are irregular—review those principle parts) that are acting like adjectives

A watched pot never boils; canned goods (I hate seeing 'can goods' on overhead signs in grocery stores)

The tricky part: must distinguish among a participle used as an adjective or a past-tense verb or as a passive verb:

Used as an adjective: they're feeling watched (can't be a verb because the verb already has a tense marker 'are', and English doesn't tolerate multiple tense markers)

Used as a past-tense verb: They watched for javelinas but didn't see any.

Used as a passive-voice verb: They are watched for abnormal behaviors

Infinitives: 'to V' phrases (English only has phrasal infinitives) used as nouns

To err is human; to forgive, divine.

I want to eat.

The tricky part: Even when verbals are used as nouns, they, especially infinitives, can still do some verb-ish work, like accepting adverbial modification or direct objects

I want to eat a cheeseburger—'cheeseburger' is a direct object of 'to eat', not of 'want' because there needs to be a syntactic job for 'to eat' (direct object of the verb 'want') that disappears if we assign 'cheeseburger' the role of direct object. I can make this even worse:

I want you to eat a cheeseburger—we can make 'want' a trivalent verb, but not a quadrivalent verb (see the page on valency). That's a valency too far. So 'cheeseburger' is still the direct object of an infinitival direct object. And 'you' is an indirect object.