

Infinitive

Definition of Infinitive

An infinitive is a form of verb that appears in its basic form. It is preceded by a particle “to,” and can serve as an [adjective](#), an [adverb](#), or a noun.

The infinitive [phrase](#) is a combination of the infinitive and objects, complements, or modifiers, such as “He plans to play cricket.” Let us take an example of simple infinitive for instance, “An enormous relief had come upon us now that the job was done. One felt an impulse to sing, to break into a run, to snigger” (*A Hanging*, by George Orwell). All the underlined verbs are infinitives.

Difference Between Infinitive and Prepositional Phrase

Though infinitive and prepositional phrases may look the same, they are actually different. An infinitive begins with a particle “to,” which comes before a verb, such as, “He wants to play.” A [prepositional phrase](#), on the other hand, begins with a preposition “to,” which comes before a noun, such as, “He went to school.”

Common Use of Infinitive

You need to walk

“To” is an infinitive form preceding the verb “walk.”

Give him the shoes to polish.

Here, the infinitive is working as an adjective that modifies shoes.

I don’t want to see

Here the infinitive “to” is serving as an adverb and it modifies the verb “see,” which follows it.

To write is his passion.

Here the infinitive “to” is functioning as the [subject](#) of “is.”

Examples of Infinitives in Literature

Example #1: *Ulysses* (by Alfred Lord Tennyson)

“We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.”

Tennyson has excellently used infinitives in the final line of this example. These infinitives are “to strive,” “to seek,” “to find,” and “to yield.”

Example #2: *The Decay of Cinema* (by Susan Sontag)

“Until the advent of television emptied the movie theaters, it was from a weekly visit to the cinema that you learned (or tried to learn) how to walk, to smoke, to kiss, to fight, to grieve.”

In this example, the author has used five infinitives in a sequence: “to walk” and “to smoke,” “to kiss,” “to fight,” and “to grieve.” All of them begin with particle “to,” which precede verbs.

Example #3: *Hamlet* (by William Shakespeare)

“In what particular thought to work I know not,
But in the gross and scope of mine opinion
This bodes some strange eruption to our state...
As it doth well appear unto our state—
But to recover of us, by strong hand.
A mote it is to trouble the mind’s eye.
In the most high and palmy state of Rome.”

In this instance, there are two infinitives: “to work,” and “to trouble.” Both of these infinitives have appeared before the main verbs “work” and “trouble” and are serving as direct objects of the verbs.

Example #4: *The Crucible* (by Arthur Miller)

“Which is not to say that nothing broke into this strict and somber way of life. When a new farmhouse was built, friends assembled to “raise the roof,” and there would be special foods cooked and probably some potent cider passed around... The parochial snobbery of these people was partly responsible for their failure to convert the Indians. Probably they also preferred to take land from heathens rather than from fellow Christians.”

Here the infinitives of the verbs “say” and “convert” are functioning as the direct objects of their verbs.

Example #5: *Alice’s Adventures in the Wonderland* (by Lewis Carroll)

“Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next. First, she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything; then she looked at the sides of the well, and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and book-shelves.”

Carroll has abundantly but skillfully used infinitives in this passage. There are five infinitives including “to look,” “to wonder,” “to happen,” and “to see.” All of them are working as direct objects of their respective verbs.

Function of Infinitive

Infinitives usually come before main verbs, but they may fall at different places in a [sentence](#) and serve various roles. Their function is to bring smoothness and flow in a sentence or complete text. They save the author from using a lot of words that would have been used in the absence of an infinitive. An infinitive is used to clarify meanings when two functions of a subject are described in the same sentence. In fact, it shows a sense of purpose in that second function.