

Gerund or Participle?

The question was:

Is there a simple way to know whether a word ending in *-ing* is a gerund or a participle?

The quick answer is No and the question isn't quite complete. Here's the slower answer:

For most teaching purposes, in fact, there's a pretty simple test. Ask what the word is doing. For example:

- a) It is **pleasing** to see that he's improving.
- b) That's a **pleasing** improvement.
- c) **Pleasing** people was really quite simple.
- d) He was **pleasing** his audience.

In sentences a) and b), we can replace the *-ing* word with a simple adjective, e.g.

- a) It is **wonderful** to see that he is improving.
- b) That's a **wonderful** improvement.

In these cases, then the *-ing* word is a participle adjective. In a) it is used predicatively and in b) it is used attributively. Most participle adjectives can do that.

In sentence c), we can replace the *-ing* word (and the whole phrase of which it forms part) with a noun, e.g.,

- c) **The instruction** was really quite simple.

In this case, the *-ing* word is acting as a noun and, traditionally, we call it a gerund. Verbs acting as nouns take the *-ing* ending and often (i.e., not always) appear as uncountable nouns.

In sentence d), we can only replace the *-ing* word with another one and remain grammatically true to its function, e.g.,

- d) He was **angering** his audience.

The *-ing* word forms part of the past progressive tense (formed from the verb *be* and the participle with *-ing*) so it's a participle.

Easy so far, but there's a snag as there commonly is when trying to make grammar simple. The truth of the matter is that there is a cline from pure gerund at one end of the spectrum and pure participle at the other.


Like this:



On the left, we have a pure countable noun (*fittings*) and on the right, a clear case of participle use of the verb, *fitting*.

That looks simple enough but we can come up with a range of intermediate forms of the word *fitting* which are not so easy to classify:

Here's what's meant:



a) *The **fittings** she had in the living room didn't match the carpet at all.*
Clearly a noun here; it's even made plural and countable.

b) *Her **fitting** of the carpet was pretty amateurish.*
Modified by a possessive, *her*, so arguably a noun but it's not referring to a thing; it's referring to an action and that's usually the work of verbs.

c) *The **fitting** of the carpet was done in an hour.*
Here we have a genitive of-phrase so it is arguably a case of using *fitting* as a noun but again the reference is to action not thing.

d) *Her quick **fitting** of the carpet was sloppy.*
Again, we can argue that this is a noun because we have an adjective modifier, *quick*, but we are clearly also talking about an action. Is it the method of fitting or the action of fitting to which we refer?

e) *I was surprised by Mary's **fitting** of the carpet so quickly.*
This is modified by the genitive, *Mary's*, but note that it is also modified by an adverb, *quickly*, and that is usually something that happens to verbs.

f) *I was surprised by Mary **fitting** the carpet so quickly.*
We mean the same as e) here but the possessive has been abandoned now and we are inching towards verb rather than noun use.

g) *I don't want Mary **fitting** my carpet!*
This is a non-finite verb use of fitting but we can replace *Mary fitting my carpet* with another purely noun phrase such as *a poorly fitted carpet* so we have an intermediate stage somewhere between noun and verb.

h) *While **fitting** the carpet, Mary noticed the clash of colours.*
This is another non-finite use of the verb but arguably more purely a verb in nature than the example in g) because we can only replace the word with a verb phrase such as *she was fitting*.

i) *I watched Mary **fitting** the carpet.*
This can be broken down in to *Mary was fitting the carpet* and *I watched her* but the verb phrase, if such it is, can be easily replaced by a noun, e.g., *the football game*, *the work*. The other question is whether it means *I watched Mary while she was fitting the carpet* or *I watched Mary's fitting of the carpet*. In the first case, *fitting* is acting as a verb and in the second case, it is acting as a noun. What is the object of watch?

j) *The one **fitting** the carpet is Mary.*
Another non-finite use to post-modify *one* in this case meaning *The one who is fitting*. Notice that the verb phrase could be replaced with a range of other types of phrase such as *The one in the corner*, *The one with the blue patterns*, *The one I want* etc.

k) *She is **fitting** the carpet badly.*
Finally, we get to an unarguable case of the word *fitting* being a verb.

It's not so easy after all, is it?

Teachers need to know this stuff and be alert to the gradual slide from verbs as pure nouns and verbs as pure participles but it is arguable whether most learners need to be troubled by it.

It may even be advisable quietly to drop the participle-gerund distinction and focus simply on what the word is doing and what else could do the job.

Reference:

Quirk, R and Greenbaum, S, 1973, *A university Grammar of English*, Harlow: Longman. (See especially p391)