

Infinitive / Gerund

Two questions on a related topic:

Nguyet from Vietnam.

I would like to know what is different between "start doing " and "start to do".

Ana Isabel Alcantara Martin

I was wondering if you could tell me why in these sentences after 'stop' there's an infinitive, "After playing football for two hours he stopped to have lunch." Sometimes I can see this verb with an infinitive and sometimes with a gerund.

Gareth Rees answers

Well Nguyet and Ana Isabel, thank you for your questions on similar topics. Both your questions concern verb patterns, how we organise the words after a verb in order to make a sentence. Sometimes we follow one verb with a second one. For example, "I want to play tennis." The first verb is 'want', the second is 'play'. Another example, "I enjoy playing tennis." The first verb is 'enjoy', the second is 'play'. However, this time we don't say 'to play', we say 'playing'. This is what we call the gerund form of a verb, playing, starting.

Verb + to + infinitive, 'I want to play' - is a very common verb pattern. As is verb + gerund, 'I enjoy playing'. But there are some things that you need to look out for.

Some verbs can only be followed by to + infinitive, for example the verb to want, "I want to play tennis."

Some verbs can only be followed by the gerund, for example the verb to enjoy. "I enjoy playing tennis."

Some verbs can be followed by both with no difference in meaning. Some verbs can be followed by both and there is a difference in meaning.

And Nguyet your question is about a verb which takes both patterns and there is no difference in meaning. The verb 'start'. You can say 'start to do' and 'start doing', for example "Last year I started learning Chinese" or, "Last year I started to learn Chinese." Both are correct and both have the same meaning. Some native speakers may prefer one form over the other, but this will be for regional or personal reasons.

Now, Ana Isabel your question was about the verb 'stop'. 'Stop' can be followed by to + infinitive or the gerund but with this verb there is a difference in meaning. Let's look at an example: "He stopped to have lunch" and "He stopped having lunch" are very different in meaning.

He stopped having lunch means he did not continue to eat his lunch. He finished eating. "He stopped having lunch because a friend was on the telephone."

"He stopped to have lunch" means he finished one thing in order to then have lunch. In Ana's example, "After playing football for two hours he stopped to have lunch." First he was playing football. Then he stopped that. Why? In order to have lunch.

So, I shall now stop to have a cup of tea. I hope the explanation helped. Don't stop writing to the BBC!

Gareth Rees has been an English language teacher and teacher trainer for over 10 years. He is currently a lecturer at London Metropolitan University and his first course book for English Language learners is due to be published in 2007.