Word Forms and Functions

The English words that we commonly identify as verbs actually serve a variety of language functions—as verbs, adjectives, and nouns. Knowing how to recognize the forms that these words can take and their associated meanings can make editing English texts easier. This handout presents an overview of three common word forms (the simple form, the –ing form, and the –ed form) and how they are used in English.

A. The Simple Form

The simple form is uninflected, which means it has no additional endings and the root structure is unchanged (*e.g.* *work*, *play*, *explore*, *understand*, and *wish*). It can occur in a variety of contexts.

1. as a complete verb

The simple form can occur as the first person singular and third person plural forms of the simple present tense.

   I *study* biology.
   The teachers in my department *assign* a lot of homework.
   I always *do* my homework in the library.
   Most of my classmates *hang out* there also.

2. as a main verb combined with a modal verb

The simple form can also occur with a modal auxiliary verb to create a compound modal verb in the present or future tense. The basic modal verbs are the following: *can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would*. Generally, modals allow the speaker to add his or her own subjective meaning (*e.g.* probability, ability, politeness, indirectness) to the meaning of a verb.

   I *can’t remember* how to do the homework.
   However, my classmate *might meet* me tonight to study.
In addition to the basic modals, English has several phrasal modals: be able to, be going to, be supposed to, had better, have to, have got to, ought to, used to.

We are supposed to have a test tomorrow.
I am going to review the material tonight.
I ought to get a good grade if I get some sleep, too.

3. as a verb in a that-clause (subjunctive complement)

Subjunctive complements are that-clauses in which the verb is uninflected and the clause functions as a noun or noun phrase in the sentence. These clauses occur in relation to the following main clause verbs: insist, demand, ask, request, prefer, propose, recommend, require, suggest.

The teacher proposed that the students study in groups.
She insists that we be ready for class.

4. as part of an infinitive

Infinitives generally occur as to + simple form of the word (e.g. to swim, to write, and to discuss). They frequently function as nouns or noun phrases and can take a subject or object position in a sentence.

I hope to earn a good grade on this exam.
To get an A would be fantastic.
Most of my classmates plan to take Advanced Biology next semester.

Infinitives can also be used as adjectives when they modify nouns/noun phrases or adjective complements when they complete the meaning of adjectives.

We have a lot of homework to do.
The questions to answer are listed on the board each day.
Unfortunately, the text is difficult to read.

The structure in order to + verb functions as an adverb and is used to express purpose; it explains why another action or condition exists. The words in order are often dropped.

I get up early (in order) to get to campus on time.
I raced out the door today (in order) to catch the bus.

In causative constructions the infinitive may appear without to. This is called the bare infinitive. Causative constructions occur when one agent causes another agent to do something and are expressed through certain verbs (e.g. cause, force, get, make, and have). These verbs also determine whether the infinitive occurs with to or as the bare infinitive (without to).

The people in my biology class make me laugh. (bare infinitive)
The teacher has us share jokes about biology. (bare infinitive)
The hilarity caused me to fall out of my chair yesterday. (to + infinitive)
B. The -ing Form

The -ing form is commonly created by reducing the verb to the base form and adding –ing. It occurs in three main contexts:

1. **as a gerund**

Gerunds, like infinitives, are noun forms of words and have a variety of grammatical functions.

   I don’t like **studying** Latin alone. (direct object)
   I have dedicated this weekend to **preparing** for the midterm. (indirect object)
   But **chatting** is a lot more fun than **studying**. (subject, object of preposition)

Note: When infinitives and gerunds occur as objects of verbs, the form is determined by the nature of the preceding verb. Some verbs require an infinitive complement, some require a gerund, and some will take either one although the meaning of the sentence may be affected.

   The teacher encourages us **to review** together. (infinitive)
   My classmates enjoy **meeting** after class. (gerund)
   We like **to discuss/discussing** the class over coffee. (infinitive or gerund with same meaning)
   She stopped **answering/to answer** the question. (infinitive or gerund but meaning changes)

2. **as the main verb of a progressive compound verb**

Progressive verb tenses (also known as continuous verb tenses) are generally used to express actions or conditions that are in progress at a particular point in time or when another action occurs. Progressive verb tenses consist of any necessary auxiliary verbs+ a form of BE+ the present participle (-ing form).

   I am **planning** to do my midterm project with three classmates.
   We will be **explaining** a difficult biological concept.
   We have been **discussing** possible choices since our study session began.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If the verb:</th>
<th>drop the e and add –ing</th>
<th>write → writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ends in silent e</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ends with the letters ie</td>
<td>change the ie to y and add –ing</td>
<td>tie → tying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>has one syllable and ends in a single vowel sound followed by a single consonant (other than w, x, or y)</td>
<td>double the final consonant and then add –ing</td>
<td>swim → swimming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>has two syllables in which the second syllable is stressed</td>
<td>double the final consonant and add -ing</td>
<td>refer → referring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>For all other verbs:</strong></td>
<td>add –ing</td>
<td>follow → following, cry → crying</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. as a participial adjective

Participial adjectives modify nouns by imparting an active meaning to the noun.

The challenging assignment worries me.
My encouraging classmates give me confidence.

C. The –ed Form

The –ed form is generally created by reducing the verb to the base form and adding –ed. Similar to the -ing form, it occurs in three main contexts:

1. as the main verb of a perfect compound verb

Perfect verb tenses are generally used to express conditions or actions that are begun or completed prior to a particular point in time or when another action occurs. Perfect verb tenses consist of any necessary auxiliary verbs + have + the past participle (-ed form).

I have studied biology for one semester. (present perfect)
I had planned to take it last semester, but it was full. (past perfect)
My teacher will have taught here for twenty years by this spring. (future perfect)

2. as the main verb in a passive voice expression

Passive voice allows us to shift the agent of an action out of the subject (active) role and into a less prominent (passive) one. To do this we use a form of BE + –ed form of the main verb. Passive voice can be recognized by the optional inclusion of a by phrase that states the agent.

Our midterm was postponed (by the teacher). (simple past)
Since then, my classmates have been motivated (by the delay) to prepare more. (present perfect)
We will be graded (by the teacher) on our individual performances. (future perfect)

Infinitives can also be made into passive structures.

The teacher expects to evaluate us on several points. (active infinitive)
We expect to be evaluated on several points. (passive infinitive)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If the verb:</th>
<th>Add -ed.</th>
<th>love → loved</th>
<th>study → studied</th>
<th>clap → clapped</th>
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<td>ends in silent e</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>ends in y</td>
<td>Change the y to i and add -ed.</td>
<td>love → loved</td>
<td>study → studied</td>
<td>clap → clapped</td>
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<tr>
<td>has one syllable and ends in a single vowel sound followed by a single consonant (other than w or x)</td>
<td>Double the final consonant and add -ed.</td>
<td>love → loved</td>
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<td>For all other verbs:</td>
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4. as a participial adjective

Like present participles, past participles can function as adjectives. Unlike present participles, which impart an active meaning to the modified noun, past participles give it a sense of being acted on.

Past Participle: The bored teacher dismissed class early.
(meaning: The teacher was bored by the class. The students should be worried!)

Present Participle: The boring teacher dismissed class early.
(meaning: The teacher bored the students. So they have cause for celebration!)

More examples of –ed adjectives include the following:

The stressed out students worked hard to prepare for their biology midterm.
The teacher gave them a well-earned A+.

A Final Note: Certain structures can result in –ing and –ed form combinations.

Being asked to present the homework to the class is stressful. (passive gerund)
Having prepared well always makes this less difficult. (gerund made from a perfect verb)

Additional References available in the UWC:
To learn more about grammatical terms and their meanings, see The Grammar Book by Marianne Celce-Murcia and Diane Larsen-Freeman. To find out how certain words are used in English see The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English or the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary.

Meg Leimkuhler, Spring 2010