

English Grammar: “to” (infinitive or preposition)

“A small word for natives, a giant subject for students of English.”

The word “**to**” in English seems like a small, innocuous word, but it can cause some confusion for English learners, because it can be a preposition, part of a verb or phrasal verb, or be part of an expression, and each context requires different grammatical rules.

1) Infinitive

When a phrase has two consecutive verbs, the second verb can be in the infinitive or the gerund form, depending on the first verb of the phrase. In the following examples, the first verb in each case demands an infinitive form in the second verb. Examples which demand the gerund form are not given here.

Examples: I **try to control** my emotions in the cinema.
We have **decided to change** the tires of the car.
He **likes to converse** during dinner.

To negate the second verb, there are two things to remember:

1. Do not use auxiliary verbs.
2. Do not split infinitives.

Examples: I **try not to cry** in the cinema. (~~don't cry~~) (~~to not cry~~)
We have decided **not to change** the tires of the car.
He likes **not to converse** during dinner.

We can also use the infinitive form of a verb as part of a verb phrase at the start of a sentence. For example:

- **to begin with**
- **to summarize**
- **to tell the truth**

Examples: **To begin with**, your pronunciation is excellent.
To summarise, your English has much improved.
To tell the truth, I don't like John.
To be honest, I'd rather not go.
“To be or not to be – that is the question.” (William Shakespeare)

We can also use “to” as a “reduced infinitive”. Examples:

- A: I want to go. Do you want **to**? B: Yes, I want **to**!
- A: Do you want to have pizza tonight? B: Yes, I'd love **to**!

2) Preposition

a) Reason

We use the preposition “to” to describe a reason using a verb. For example:

- I visited my girlfriend’s house **to** give her flowers.
- He stayed at home **to** avoid the virus.
- The dog ate a lot of food **to** fill its belly.

In these examples, “to” is the same as “in order to”.

b) Fixed preposition after specific verbs

The following verbs always demand the preposition “to”:

Verbs of communication

- talk to I must **talk to** my maths teacher about the homework.
- speak to I rarely **speak to** my father.
- write to He hasn’t **written to** me for a long time.
- explain to Can you **explain to** me why we have seasons?
- describe to I **described to** him exactly how it happened.
- suggest to She **suggested to** me that I buy a robot cleaner.
- say to She **said to** me that she won’t be late.

Verbs of transference

- give to I **gave** a bike **to** my son for his birthday.
- send to Please **send it to** me later.
- lend to Can you **lend** your car **to** me?
- offer to I **offered to** take him, but he wants to walk.
- bring to Can you **bring** your guitar **to** my house tomorrow?
- sell to I **sold** my house **to** my neighbour.
- deliver to They **delivered** the package **to** the wrong house.

Verbs of movement

- go to Yesterday I **went to** the park.
- come to Can you **come to** my house later?
- return to I must **return to** school tomorrow.
I **returned** the book **to** the library yesterday.
- travel to He **travelled to** every country in Europe on his vacation.
- move to I’m going **to move to** Florida.
I’ll **move** the piano **to** the other room later.
- walk to I always **walk to** work.
- run to My dog **ran to** the park without stopping.
- drive to Yesterday I **drove to** the shops.
Can you **drive** me **to** the shops tomorrow?
- fly to We **flew to** London and then **to** Paris.

Verbs of reaction / response

- listen to Bob never **listens to** the teacher.
- reply to I must **reply to** my emails today.
- respond to The company hasn't **responded to** my request yet.
- apologize to John – **apologize to** Mary now!
- confess to The three men **confessed to** the crime immediately.
- admit to He **admitted to** the robbery without pressure.
- object to They **objected to** the new rules.
- consent to I never **consented to** the new rules!

Other verbs and expressions

- belong to This book **belongs to** me.
- happen to That never **happens to** me!
- refer to I am **referring to** the incident last Tuesday.
- compare to **Compared to** last year, this year has been much better.
- contribute to Can you **contribute to** Mary's birthday whip-round?
- sentence to The judge **sentenced him to** life in prison.
- be sentenced to Smith **was sentenced to** 25 years without parole.
- be committed to She **is 100% committed to** the project.
- be married to Fred **is married to** Jane.
- get married to My son is going to **get married to** his girlfriend.
- pay attention to Please **pay attention to** the flight attendant.
- subscribe to I **subscribe to** three online magazines.
- in order to He needs a passport **in order to** study abroad.
- due to **Due to** the weather, the class is cancelled.
- used to I **used to** smoke when I was young.
- be used to I **am used to** speaking English every day.
- get used to I will never **get used to** living in Japan.
- look forward to I **look forward to** seeing you tomorrow.

How do we know if 'to' is a preposition or part of the infinitive?

1. Check what follows 'to':

a) If it's a verb (go, eat, play, run) then it's part of the infinitive.

- I need **to go**.
- She likes **to read**.
- They want **to come**.

b) If it's a noun, pronoun or gerund then it's a preposition.

- We went **to the park**. (noun)
- I gave it **to her**. (pronoun)
- He confessed **to stealing**. (gerund)

2. Can you rearrange the phrase?

a) If so, then it's a preposition.

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| • I went to the park. | → | To the park, I went. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| • I sent an email to him. | → | To him, I sent an email. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| • He confessed to killing her. | → | To killing her, he confessed. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |

b) If not, then it's part of the infinitive.

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|---|------------------------|--|
| • I want to dance. | → | To dance, I want. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> (I want what?) |
| • We like to eat pizza. | → | To eat pizza, we like. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> (We like what?) |
| • He needs to go. | → | To go, he needs. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> (He needs what?) |

These examples sound strange and incomplete.

Exercise. Indicate whether 'to' is a preposition or part of the infinitive.

	Preposition	Infinitive
1. It belongs to my wife.	_____	_____
2. He is committed to change.	_____	_____
3. She agreed to meet.	_____	_____
4. I never sell alcohol to children.	_____	_____
5. He confessed to stealing the car.	_____	_____
6. I look forward to seeing you.	_____	_____
7. She stopped to smoke.	_____	_____
8. I want to contribute to the fund.	_____	_____ (first)
	_____	_____ (second)