

Understanding Verbs I

The first step in understanding the complex uses of verbs in English is to know their different forms: *infinitive*, *present tense*, *past tense*, *past participle*, and *present participle*.

Infinitive	Present Tense	Past Tense	Past Participle	Pres. Participle
*to be	is (singular) are (plural) am (I)	was (singular) were (plural)	been	being
*to have	has (singular) have (plural)	had	had	having
*to do	does (singular) do (plural)	did	done	doing
to listen	listen(s)	listened	listened	listening
to look	look(s)	looked	looked	looking
*to go	go(es)	went	gone	going
*to take	take(s)	took	taken	taking
*to give	give(s)	gave	given	giving

Infinitives

Infinitives are formed by adding *to* in front of the basic form of the verb, but in some situations, *to* is omitted. Even though they are verb forms, infinitives don't function as verbs in sentences; they play other grammatical roles.

Present Tense Forms

There are two verb forms in the *present tense*—one used with singular subjects, and one used with plural subjects. The verb *to be* is unique in that it has three present tense forms, and it has both singular and plural forms in the past tense. (Because it is extremely important to be able to easily recognize the forms of *to be*, I have highlighted them above. Be sure to memorize them.)

The student is in the classroom. [The subject *student* takes the singular verb form.]

The students are in the classroom. [The subject *students* takes the plural verb form.]

I am in the classroom. [The subject *I* takes the special form *am*.]

Participles

You can remember *participles* by thinking of them as only *partial* verbs. To function as verbs, they must have helping verbs. Their names are misleading; since participles must have helping verbs to indicate their tense (past, present, or future), *they have no true tense by themselves*.

She has taken the test. [The helping verb *has* makes the verb present (perfect) tense.]

She had taken the test. [The helping verb *had* makes the verb past (perfect) tense.]

She will have taken the test. [*Will have* makes the verb future (perfect) tense.]

Irregular Verbs

For *irregular* verbs (marked with *), the past tense and past participle forms are different, but for *regular* verbs, the past tense and past participle forms are both formed by adding *-ed*. However, they can always be distinguished by their different uses. If an *-ed* form is acting as a verb by itself, it is a past tense verb; if it has a helping verb or is acting in some other way, it is a participle.

Complete Verbs vs. Incomplete Verbs

Within the five basic forms of verbs, there is an important distinction to be made: the difference between what I will call “complete” and “incomplete” verb forms.

“Complete verbs” (also called “finite verbs”) are verbs that have a tense: past, present, or future. To actually function as a verb within a sentence, a verb must be complete. The most obvious examples of complete verbs are the present and past tense forms, but the addition of helping verbs can give participles a tense:

*Our DNA **determines** many things about us. (Our genes **determine** many things about us.)*
*The doctor **determined** the cause of the illness.*
*The scientist **has determined** the source of the outbreak.*
*Our facial features **are determined** by our DNA.*
*The commission **is determining** the best way to confront the problem.*

In these sentences, the present tense forms *determines* and *determine* are the verbs for the subjects *DNA* and *genes*, the past tense form *determined* is the verb for the subject *doctor*, the present tense helping verb *has* and the past participle *determined* form the verb for the subject *scientist*, the present tense helping verb *are* and the past participle *determined* form the verb for the subject *features*, and the present tense helping verb *is* and the present participle *determining* form the verb for the subject *commission*.

“Incomplete verbs,” participles and infinitives, do not act as verbs by themselves. When they don’t have helping verbs, participles play other grammatical roles within a sentence, just as infinitives do:

*The **determined** doctor found a way **to cure** her patient.*
***Determined to find** the answer, the scientist worked all night long.*
*The outcome **determined** by the judges conflicted with the voters’ desires.**
*Luck is often the **determining** factor in scientific discoveries.*

In these sentences, the past participle *determined*, the present participle *determining*, and the infinitive *to cure* are acting as adjectives, and the infinitive *to find* is acting as an adverb. Because it is acting as a modifier here, *determined* must be a past participle, not a past tense verb. (The verbs in these sentences are *found*, *worked*, *conflicted*, and *is*.)

***Determining** the cause of an illness is the first step toward **finding** a cure.*
***To determine** the best solution to a problem often requires patience.*

In these sentences, the verb forms in bold are all acting as nouns: the present participle *determining* is the subject of the verb *is*, the present participle *finding* is the object of the preposition *toward*, and the infinitive *to determine* is the subject of the verb *requires*. Only present participles and infinitives, not past participles, can act as nouns. Present participles acting as nouns are called *gerunds*.

* The phrase “**determined** by the judges” is a derivative of the clause “The outcome **was determined** by the judges.” It might be helpful to think of this sentence as a combination of that clause and “The outcome **conflicted** with the voters’ desires.”