

18. Infinitives

1 Definition

The infinitive is the basic form of a verb such as *to give* in English or *donner* in French from which other forms are derived. It never changes its ending (as do conjugated forms such as *donne*, *donnez*, *donnons* etc.) and does not take a subject (you **cannot** say **je donner*, *la femme donner*, etc.).

2 Tense

The infinitive can be used to express actions in either the present or the past. The **present infinitive** of a verb refers to any individual verb used in its basic infinitive form:

Je voudrais **venir** à la soirée

I'd like to come to the party

The **past infinitive** is made up of the infinitive of the auxiliary verb *avoir* or *être* plus a past participle:

Il regrette d'**avoir perdu** le document

He regrets having lost the document

As the past infinitive in English always takes *have* as an auxiliary, be careful when forming the past infinitive of *être* verbs:

Elle est heureuse d'**être venue** à la soirée

She is happy to have come this evening

3 Uses

The infinitive is most commonly used:

3.1 In a construction involving a modal or other preceding verb:

Je dois **être** au bureau à neuf heures

I must be at the office at nine o'clock

J'ai oublié de **fermer** les rideaux

I forgot to close the curtains

3.2 In a construction involving an adjective:

Je serais très heureux d'**aider** votre mère

I'd be very happy to help your mother

Elle n'est pas prête à y **aller**

She's not prepared to go there

3.3 After any preposition other than *en*:

Il a dit cela pour **plaisanter**

He said that as a joke

3.4 As the subject of a sentence. Note that the infinitive is generally used on its own and **not** introduced by *de*:

Fumer nuit gravement à la santé

Smoking seriously damages your health

Augmenter les taux d'intérêt n'est jamais une démarche populaire
Putting up interest rates is never a popular step

3.5 In documents, notices etc. giving orders or instructions, as an alternative to the imperative:

Pour plus de renseignements, **voir** page 28

For more information, see page 28

Ne pas **marcher** sur la pelouse

Do not walk on the grass

3.6 The past infinitive is most commonly used in a construction involving *après*:

Après **avoir vérifié** que toutes les fenêtres étaient fermées, il est rentré chez lui

*After **checking** that all the windows were shut, he went home*

Après **être arrivés** au restaurant, nous avons d'abord pris l'apéritif

*On **arriving** at the restaurant, we started off by having a drink*