

Gerund or Participle (or verbal noun)?

The question was:

Is there a simple way to know whether a word ending in *-ing* is a gerund or a participle?

The quick answer is No and the question isn't quite complete. Here's the slower answer:

For most teaching purposes, in fact, there's a pretty simple test. Ask what the word is doing. For example:

- a) It is **pleasing** to see that he's improving.
- b) That's a **pleasing** improvement.
- c) **Pleasing** people was really quite simple.
- d) He was **pleasing** his audience.

In sentences a) and b), we can replace the *-ing* word with a simple adjective, e.g.

- a) It is ~~pleasing~~ **wonderful** to see that he is improving.
- b) That's a ~~pleasing~~ **wonderful** improvement.

In these cases, then the *-ing* word is a participle adjective. In a) it is used predicatively and in b) it is used attributively. Most participle adjectives can do that.

In sentence c), we can replace the *-ing* word (and the whole phrase of which it forms part) with a noun, e.g.,

- c) ~~Pleasing people~~ **The instruction** was really quite simple.

In this case, the *-ing* word is acting as a noun and, traditionally, we call it a gerund. Verbs acting as nouns take the *-ing* ending and often (i.e., not always) appear as uncountable nouns. The thing to notice here is that the word retains some verbal characteristics because it takes a direct object (*people*) and, if we want to modify it we have to use an adverb to get, e.g.:

Greatly pleasing people was really quite simple

so it is not functioning purely as a noun.

In sentence d), we can only replace the *-ing* word with another one and remain grammatically true to its function, e.g.,

- d) He was ~~pleasing~~ **angering** his audience.

The *-ing* word forms part of the past progressive tense (formed from the verb *be* and the participle with *-ing*) so it's a participle.

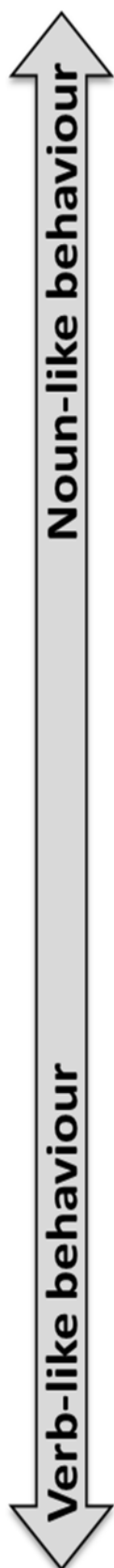
Easy so far, but there's a snag as there commonly is when trying to make grammar simple. The truth of the matter is that there is a cline from pure gerund at one end of the spectrum and pure participle at the other.

Like this:



On the left, we have a pure countable noun (*fittings*) and on the right, a clear case of participle use of the verb, *fitting*.

That looks simple enough but we can come up with a range of intermediate forms of the word *fitting* which are not so easy to classify. Here's what's meant:



- a) *The **fittings** she had in the living room didn't match the carpet at all.*

Clearly a noun here; it's even made plural and countable. Lots of other nouns which are derived from verbs look like gerunds and they probably are but classifying them as a special form of noun may not be wise. They include, for example:

booking, carving, christening, clipping, covering, crossing, drawing, failing, flavouring, heading, meeting, mooring, offering, peeling, rambling, ruling, saving, setting, shaving, sighting, swelling, turning, warning etc. all of which can be made plural, modified by adjectives and function either as the subject or the object of verbs. They are undeniably nouns.

- b) *Her **fitting** of the carpet was pretty amateurish.*

Modified by a possessive, *her*, so arguably a noun but it's not referring to a thing; it's referring to an action and that's usually the work of verbs. It is, however, clearly the subject of a copular verb and linked to the attribute adjective phrase and that is a noun-like behaviour.

- c) *The **fitting** of the carpet was done in an hour.*

Here we have a genitive of-phrase so it is arguably a case of using *fitting* as a noun but again the reference is to action not thing.

- d) *Her quick **fitting** of the carpet was sloppy.*

Again, we can argue that this is a noun because we have an adjective modifier, *quick*, but we are clearly also talking about an action. Is it the method of fitting or the action of fitting to which we refer when we say it was sloppy?

- e) *I was surprised by Mary's **fitting** of the carpet so quickly.*

This is modified by the genitive, *Mary's*, but note that it is also modified by an adverb, *quickly*, and that is usually something that happens to verbs.

- f) *I was surprised by Mary **fitting** the carpet so quickly.*

We mean the same as e) here but the possessive has been abandoned now and we are inching towards verb rather than noun use.

Additionally, the word *fitting* now has an object and that is something that verbs do and nouns can't.

- g) *I don't want Mary **fitting** my carpet!*

This is a non-finite verb use of *fitting* but we can replace *Mary fitting my carpet* with another purely noun phrase such as *a poorly fitted carpet* so we have an intermediate stage somewhere between noun and verb.

- h) *While **fitting** the carpet, Mary noticed the clash of colours.*

This is another non-finite use of the verb but arguably more purely a verb in nature than the example in g) because we can only replace the word with a verb phrase such as *she was fitting*.

- i) *I watched Mary **fitting** the carpet.*

This can be broken down in to *Mary was fitting the carpet* and *I watched her* but the verb phrase, if such it is, can be easily replaced by a noun, e.g., *the football game, the work*. The other question is whether it means *I watched Mary while she was fitting the carpet* or *I watched Mary's fitting of the carpet*. In the first case, *fitting* is acting as a verb and in the second case, it is acting as a noun. What is the object of watch?

- j) *The one **fitting** the carpet is Mary.*

Another non-finite use to post-modify *one* in this case meaning *The one who is fitting*. Notice that the verb phrase could be replaced with a range of other types of phrase such as *The one in the corner, The one with the blue patterns, The one I want* etc.

- k) *She is **fitting** the carpet badly.*

Finally, we get to an unarguable case of the word *fitting* being a verb.

It's not so easy after all, is it?

Teachers need to know this stuff and be alert to the gradual slide from verbs as pure nouns and verbs as pure participles but it is arguable whether most learners need to be troubled by it.

Verbal nouns

If we look again at the first example in the list above we will find that we can distinguish between a gerund (i.e., a verb with strong noun-like characteristics) and a verbal noun (i.e., a noun formed from a verb). Here are the distinctions:

1. A gerund retains some distinct verb-like characteristics:
 - a. It is often followed by a direct object as in, e.g.:
Her painting the garage that colour was a mistake
in which *the garage* functions as the direct object of the gerund *painting*.
 - b. If we want to modify a gerund we need an adverb, not an adjective so we get, e.g.:
Her illegally painting the garage that colour was a mistake
 - c. Gerunds cannot be pluralised so we do not allow:
**Her paintings the garage every year*
2. A verbal noun, on the other hand acts as a noun in all respects:
 - a. It cannot take a direct object because it is not a verb so we do not allow:
**The painting the village looked awful*
and need to insert a prepositional phrase to get the same meaning as in:
The painting of the village looked awful
 - b. If we want to modify a verbal noun, we need an adjective not an adverb so we can have:
The hideous painting of the village hung over his bed
not
**The hideously painting of the village hung over his bed*
 - c. We can pluralise a verbal noun just as we can pluralise a regular noun so we can have
There were lots of similar paintings of the village in the house

Verbal nouns can also be formed in other ways apart from the *-ing* ending so we can, for example make:

discovery as a noun from the verb *discover*

finish as a noun from the verb *finish* with no changes (a process of simple conversion)

carriage as a noun from the verb *carry*

refusal as a noun from the verb *refuse*

and so on. All the resulting nouns are fully noun-like in behaviour and carry no verbal force.

Catenative verbs

A confusing and difficult area of English grammar is the selection of the right form of a verb when it is part of a chain. For example:

- a) *I expected to go to the party*
- b) *She agreed to go to the party*
- c) *They enjoyed going to the party*
- d) *I regretted going to the party*

And so on. Traditionally, the explanation is that some verbs are followed by infinitives and some by gerunds but, unfortunately, the explanation is faulty. We can also have, for example:

- e) *I expected going to the party would be a mistake*
- f) *We agreed going to the party would be nice*

The problem is that the *-ing* form of the verb is used here in two different ways. In examples c) and d) we have the usual use of the *-ing* form of the verb when it is used retrospectively, the first verb occurring after the second. Compare, for example:

- g) *She forgot to go to the party*
- h) *She forgot going to the party*

In which case the ordering of the events is reversed. In g) the forgetting preceded the party and in h) the forgetting followed it.

Usually, verbs such as *hope, intend, expect, agree, choose, long, decide* and so on which all refer prospectively are followed by the infinitive, not, as the traditional way of explaining it is, by the gerund.

That's clear enough but what about e) and f)?

Here we have the form *going* used as part of a noun phrase. That phrase can be replaced by other nouns not derived from verbs so we have, e.g.:

- i) *I expected the letter*
- j) *She agreed the plan*

and so on.

The explanation lies in the transitive nature of the verb. Transitive verbs can be followed by direct objects and those are often nouns or noun phrases. That is why we can also have, e.g.:

- k) *I decided taking the train was a waste of my time*
- l) *She arranged camping in the forest for the children*

Although both *decide* and *arrange* are, traditionally, followed by the *to*-infinitive because they refer to later events or actions, in this case the following phrase is the object of the verb and, predictably, the gerund is selected because it is a noun form.

Accordingly, we can have:

- m) *I decided to take the train*
but not
- n) **I decided to take the train was a waste of my time*
or
- o) **I decided taking the train*

And we allow

- p) *She arranged to camp on her holiday*
but not
- q) **She arranged camping on her holiday*
(unless we mean something slightly different) or
- r) **She arranged to camp for the children*

It may be advisable quietly to drop the participle-gerund distinction and focus simply on what the word is doing and what else could do the job.

Reference:

Quirk, R and Greenbaum, S, 1973, *A University Grammar of English*, Harlow: Longman. (See especially p391)