

DEEP GRAMMAR

ACES 2018, Chicago

1. Fused participle / Genitive with a gerund

Participle = verbal that works like an adjective

Gerund = verbal that works like a noun

Genitive = possessive case

What construction are we talking about here?

She was annoyed at her roommate unloading the dishwasher at 6 a.m. vs.

She was annoyed at her roommate's unloading the dishwasher at 6 a.m.

The chef took them adding salt as a personal affront. vs.

The chef took their adding salt as a personal affront.

The genitive is traditionally correct and is usually preferred, but either is grammatical. Here's a recent one I spotted "in the wild": "Two-thirds of survey participants reported that they would find videos of zookeepers interacting with animals the most interesting."

So ask: What's the focus? That will determine the better choice.

Focus on the action → use a genitive with a gerund

The students worried about the teacher's finding out about their cheating.

Focus on the noun (especially non-person nouns) → use a fused participle

The students worried about the test being harder than expected.

2. Hortatory subjunctive

This type of subjunctive is used for suggestions, requests and commands (exhortations).

These sentences often start with "let" or "may" and almost always occur in the present tense.

Let us be sensible about this. May he live to be 100.

But they don't have to start this way; they just have to express an exhortation:

The City Council is proposing that elections be moved to November.

The dean suggested that every student read the Code of Conduct.

The agency requires that each drug go through rigorous testing.

Use the infinitive form of the verb (that is, don't conjugate it).

3. Double genitive

Double genitives include both an "of" and a possessive noun/pronoun.

Barney is a friend of mine.

That book of Jane's took her years to write.

Those dogs of Raoul's win the contest every year.

This construction seems redundant, but has been used for centuries and is considered acceptable. It is necessary with personal pronouns: a cousin of hers, a colleague of theirs.

4. Nominative absolute

This uncommon construction uses a noun + a participle to adverbially modify a sentence, adding extra information. If you take it out, the sentence is still grammatical.

The templates were redone, the editor having criticized the staleness of the pages.

Jordan having won six championships with the Bulls, the team retired No. 23.

Here's a recent one I spotted in the Chronicle of Higher Education: "The university being one of those complexes with vast parking lots extending in all directions, he would be forced to wander through the lots looking for his car."

The noun prevents the participle from dangling, so placement in the sentence is more flexible. The verbal is a participle, not a gerund, so resist the temptation to make the noun possessive. Also, an absolute phrase does not require a preposition.

5. Distributive plurals

When the subject of a sentence is plural, and each member of the subject individually possesses an object (direct object or object of a preposition) in the sentence, the thing that is possessed is usually in the plural. This construction is known as the distributive plural.

Students can expect to hold many jobs over their lifetimes.

How many fans in the stands actually take off their hats during the national anthem?

However, for abstract concepts, the singular is preferred:

The children had to use their imagination when they drew pictures.

And the singular is needed if the plural would be ambiguous:

We all told the group what our favorite book was.

6. Object complements with ditransitive verbs

Transitive verbs are verbs that take a direct object; ditransitive verbs double the fun. These verbs take either a direct object + an indirect object or a direct object + an object complement (these are "attributive ditransitive verbs"). Object complements further describe the direct object, rather than referring to the recipient of it, as an indirect object does. Like subject complements, they can be nouns or adjectives.

Our neighbors painted their house (direct object) a bilious green (object complement).

The university named the liberal-arts dean (direct object) interim provost (object complement).

The situation made them (direct object) terribly frustrated (object complement).

No other words (such as "as") are needed to introduce an object complement: It simply follows the direct object.

7. Quantifiers and verb agreement

Numerals and other words expressing quantity can be tricky because when they're the subject of the sentence, they don't govern the verb; instead, what's being quantified determines the number of the verb. If that's a singular, use a singular verb; if it's a plural, use a plural verb.

The survey found more than three-fourths of the generation doesn't trust advertising.

Nearly 40 percent of the building is empty.

Right now, 40 percent of my colleagues are on vacation.

You may have been taught at some point that "none" is always singular, but it falls into this category as well.

None of the vegan, gluten-free pizza was eaten. (one pizza)

None of the vegan, gluten-free pizzas were eaten. (multiple pizzas)