

56 Infinitive clauses

1 Form and use

An infinitive clause can act as the subject or complement of the verb *be*:

To reach the top is their aim. Their aim is to reach the top.



We use *for* with an infinitive clause if the subject of the infinitive is not the same as the subject of the sentence:

X Jack's aim is his team to win. ✓ Jack's aim is for his team to win.

We can use the following infinitive forms:

	ACTIVE INFINITIVE	PASSIVE INFINITIVE
simple	(not) to mend	(not) to be mended
continuous	(not) to be mending	(not) to be being mended
perfect	(not) to have mended	(not) to have been mended

We use the perfect infinitive for an event that happened before the event in the main clause:
Her greatest claim to fame is to have been chosen for the last Olympic squad.

(She is famous now because she was chosen in the past.)

Sentences with an infinitive clause as their subject can sound rather formal. In speech we usually prefer impersonal *it* (► Unit 43.5) or an *-ing* form (► Unit 46.1):

*To keep up a friendship is difficult. → It's difficult to keep up a friendship.
Keeping up a friendship is difficult.*

FORMALITY CHECK

In spoken English we can also use some specific expressions followed by an infinitive clause to comment on the information in the main clause:

*To tell the truth, I found the exhibition disappointing. I'm not keen on spicy food, to be honest.
To cut a long story short, he's left home.*

2 Defining clauses

We can use an infinitive clause to identify or classify a person or thing in the main clause, in a similar way to a defining relative clause (► Unit 53.2). We can do this after a superlative, an ordinal number (e.g. *first*), or *one, next, last* and *only*:

The youngest person to enter the programme was just fourteen.

(= The youngest person that entered ...)

The window seat is usually the first one to be taken. (= the first one which is taken)

Linda was the only one to stay for the whole performance. (= the only one who stayed ...)



We don't usually use an infinitive clause to replace relative clauses containing modal verbs, because the meaning would not be clear:

[*He's the only player to save the team from defeat.*] (could mean 'who saved' or 'who will save')

✓ *He's the only player who might save the team from defeat.*

3 Purpose and result clauses

We often use an infinitive clause to describe a deliberate purpose or aim. This is the infinitive of purpose (► Unit 45.4):

Davy took a year out to travel and see the world.

ACADEMIC ENGLISH

Infinitives of purpose are common in academic English:

Dickins ended each episode with a cliffhanger to encourage readers to buy the next edition.

We can use an infinitive to describe a result or something unexpected, especially with *only* and verbs such as *find, discover, realise*, etc. (► Unit 45.4):

Mike rushed out, only to realise he'd forgotten his keys.

Lizzie rejoined her friends, only to discover that Mr Darcy had left.

Infinitives after verbs, nouns and adjectives ► Units 45 and 46