

Uses of the to-infinitive

Look at the following sentences:

To err is human.

To retreat now would be a disgrace.

What are the subjects of these two sentences? You will have noticed that they are 'to err' and 'to retreat' – both infinitives. Thus we have seen that the to-infinitive can be used as a noun to form the subject of a sentence.

Note

Although the to-infinitive can be used as the subject of a sentence, it is more common to write these sentences with a preparatory it as the provisional subject.

It is human to err.

It would be a disgrace to retreat now.

To-infinitive as the object

Study the following sentences.

John likes to swim in the sea.

Alice decided to meet the principal.

Peter wants to go abroad.

John likes ... what? To swim in the sea

Alice decided ... what? To meet the principal

Peter wants ... what? To go abroad

Here the infinitives to swim, to meet and to go are the objects of the verbs likes, decided and wants respectively. The to-infinitives are thus used as nouns to form the objects of transitive verbs.

To-infinitives as subject complements

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Read the following sentences.

The best thing to do now is to vanish.

Your duty is to support her.

Here the to-infinitives to do and to support are the complements of the subjects thing and duty.