Many words are mistaken for verbs and can create confusion when we are searching for the real verbs in our sentences. The most common verb impostors end in ING (eating, writing, flying, ringing), end in ED/IRREGULAR FORMS (abandoned, awarded, eaten, rung, drunk), or follow the word TO (to go, to walk, to forget, to be).

Part 1: ING Impostors

ING words can never be verbs by themselves, but they can sometimes be part of a verb. When ING words come after a form of be (am, is, are, was, were, be, been), they form part of a verb. In the sentence below, the verb is formed by combining the helping verb WAS and the word RINGING.

*The telephone was ringing constantly.*

Here are some more examples of ING words forming a part of a verb (the full verb is in bold and the ING word is underlined):

*The young frogs were jumping from rock to rock.*

*Chao Li is auditioning for a role in a science-fiction movie.*

Non-Verb ING Words

When ING words do not come after a form of be, they are not verbs. In those cases, they act as adjectives or nouns.

ING Words as Adjectives

ING words can be adjectives; in other words, these words can describe nouns.

Example: *The ringing telephone drove everyone crazy.*

In the above sentence, “The ringing telephone drove everyone crazy,” the word “ringing” is an adjective describing the noun “telephone.” Therefore, in that sentence, the word “ringing” is not a verb. The actual verb in that sentence is “drove.”

ING Words as Nouns

ING words can be nouns. Just like other nouns, ING words are often subject or object.

Example: *Participating in a team sport can help employees develop office skills.*

In the above sentence, the verb is “can help” while the word “participating” is a noun.

Here are a few more examples of ING words acting as either adjectives or nouns. After each sentence, the verb is shown in parentheses.

The Writing Centre  
Department of English
Exercise 1:
Write ten sentences that include ING words. Then carefully identify the actual verbs in those sentences. Remember, if the ING word does not follow a form of the verb “be” (am, is, are, was, were, be, or been), the ING word is not a verb.

Part 2: ED/IRREGULAR FORM IMPOSTORS

Words that end in ED (walked, discarded, etc.) can sometimes be verbs by themselves. In those cases, they usually express events that take place in the past. Here are some examples of ED words that act as verbs:

- Marika walked to school.
- Omar discarded the old shoes.
- Yuri communicated with unusual grace.

Words that end in ED can also be part of a verb. In these cases, the ED word would be preceded by HAS, HAVE or HAD. Here are some examples of ED words that are part of a verb:

- The orchestra members have rejected the latest offer from the board.
- Archimedes has discovered a cure for boredom.
- Hanmei has developed a fast and reliable method for checking balance sheets.

Words that end in IRREGULAR FORMS (forgotten, drunk, swum, etc.) can be part of a verb, as in the following examples:

- The nimble but not so dynamic duo had forgotten to pay for their pizza.
- Guillermo’s thirsty cat has drunk all the goat’s milk.
- Kulveer’s three children have swum twelve laps in the community pool.

Non-Verb ED/IRREGULAR FORM Words

Words that end in ED or IRREGULAR forms are often adjectives; that is, they are used to describe nouns. Here are some examples of such adjectives:

- The forgotten kittens shivered in the early morning rain.
- The unidentified flying object turned out to be a meteor fragment.
The broken violin came to life in the magical hands of the seasoned musician.

In the above sentences words in bold type (forgotten, unidentified, broken and seasoned) look like verbs, but they are in fact adjectives. The real verbs in those sentences are underlined (shivered, turned and came).

Exercise 2:
Write ten sentences that include ED/IRREGULAR FORM words. Then carefully identify the actual verbs in those sentences.

Part 3: TO DO words

Many people think of expressions such as TO DO as verbs, but in fact they are not. Often these expressions are nouns, and just like nouns, they can be the subject or the object in a sentence.

One way to see the role of these TO expressions as nouns is to consider first the following sentence:

Tzvia likes tea.

In the above sentence, the subject is TZVIA, the verb is LIKES and the object is TEA (the word “tea” is a noun).

Ask yourself, “What does Tzvia like?” The answer is tea.

Now consider the following sentence:

Tzvia likes to dance.

In this sentence, as in the previous one, the verb is LIKES. In this case, the object is TO DANCE (the expression TO DANCE performs the same function here as the word TEA did in the previous sentence. In other words, TO DANCE is a noun.

Ask yourself, “What does Tzvia like?” The answer is TO DANCE.

In sentences that include TO and the verb-like word in its simple form (to be, to go, to eat, to walk, to terminate, to graduate, etc.) the resulting expression will often be a noun - never a verb.

Here are some more sentences that include these verb impostors.

Zihong wants to write a poem about the life of a college student.
Mohamed forgot to put a stamp on the envelope.
Keiko decided to wear her new Gucci shoes to the prom.
FINDING REAL VERBS 2:
The Imposters

Zachariah tried very hard to quit biting his nails.

In the above sentences the actual verbs are wants, forgot, decided and tried. The expressions to write, to put, to wear and to quit are nouns and not verbs.

Exercise 3:
Write ten sentences that include TO expressions (e.g. to go, to see, to boogie). Then carefully identify the actual verbs in those sentences.

Exercise 4:
Choose an article from today’s newspaper. Starting from the first paragraph, lightly cross out all the verb impostors in each sentence. Then identify the actual verbs in those sentences.