

# The Difference in Meaning between Begin (Start) *to-V* and Begin (Start) *V-ing*

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**Abstract** Regarding the difference between *begin (start)+infinitive* and *begin (start)+gerund*, there are some who simply dismiss it by saying that there is not much difference between the two. There are, however, cases in which there certainly exist some differences in meaning between the two. This article explores, first, the validity of Declerck's differentiation between the two, and then discusses some major differences that exist between the two: the differences in terms of potentiality and performance, and in terms of a point in time and duration in time. All in all, I am sure that I was able to make a number of important new discoveries in this study that had not been made by the grammars in the U. S. and the U. K.

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**Key Words** : potentiality, performance, a point in time, duration in time

## 1. Introduction

With regard to the difference in meaning between *begin (start)+infinitive* and *begin (start)+gerund*, there are some who say that there is not much difference between the two. Swan (1995 : 296) says that "Usually there is no important difference" between the two forms in (1a) and (1b).

- (1) a. She began playing/to play the guitar when she was six.
- b. He started talking/to talk about golf but everybody went out of the room.

Alexander (1988 : 319) also says that "These verbs (*begin, start, etc.*) can be followed by a *to*-infinitive or *-ing* without any change in meaning."

We cannot, however, dismiss this matter simply by saying that there is not much difference between the two, because, while there are cases in which there would be no difference, there are certainly cases in which there are differences in meaning or usage between the two. Thus it is the objective of this article to examine what kind of differences there are between *begin (start)+infinitive* and *begin (start)+gerund*. This article deals with, broadly speaking, first, Declerck's differentiation, and second, some actual differences that can be observed between the two. In the first part, I will argue that the way of Declerck's differentiation is not exhaustive enough or not appropriate enough, and in the second part, I will discuss some major differences more minutely than Declerck.

## 2. Declerck's Differentiation between Begin (Start) *to-V* and Begin (Start) *V-ing*

### 2.1. An intentional or unintentional meaning

Declerck (1991 : 506) says that "The infinitive is used to refer to an unintentional situation." In fact, just as Declerck says, the infinitive is certainly used to refer to an unintentional situation as the examples in (2) suggest. However, it should be noted at the same time that the infinitive is also used to imply an intentional situation like the examples in (3) show.

- (2) a. Suddenly the room started to spin and the air became so thick that it was hard to breathe.

(Joan E. Lloyd and Edwin B. Herman, *Dial 911*)

- b. Levinson founded his firm in 1997, when the price of gold began to climb again.

(*The New Yorker*, July 17, 2000)

- c. ...when Blaze began to wheeze, I hurried to pull the cork and pour....

(Hester Kaplan, "Live Life King-Sized")

- d. The children began to get excited....

(Jhumpa Lahiri, "Interpreter of Maladies")

- (3) a. I began to examine Rajij while my other crew members took a set of vitals.

(Joan E. Lloyd and Edwin B. Herman, *Dial 911*)

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b. Researchers began to document developmental delays and behavioral problems....  
(*The New Yorker*, July 17, 2000)

c. In the darkness he started to think.  
(Samrat Upadhyay, "The Good Shop-keeper")

d. So we started to expose him to Madison Square Garden....

(Ina Yalof, *The Story of a Hospital*)

Declerck goes on saying in connection with *begin* (*start*)+gerund that it is used to refer to an intentional action. The gerund is certainly used to refer to an intentional action as the examples in (4) indicate. However, on the other hand, as the examples in (5) clearly show, the gerund is also used to imply an unintentional action.

(4) a. The two detectives went back to their office and, beginning at ten that evening, methodically began phoning each upstate prison. (*Reader's Digest*, June 2000)

b. That was the signal for Eric to begin removing his heart. (ibid.)

c. Back at the rehab centre, Dorine began sticking posters of planes all round her bed. (*Reader's Digest*, July 2000)

d. "First, they started charging a dollar an acre for letting me hunt...."

(*The New Yorker*, July 17, 2000)

(5) a. We had been performing CPR for about a minute when the man gave a sigh and began breathing on his own.

(Joan E. Lloyd and Edwin B. Herman, *Dial 911*)

b. She missed her parents so much that she began sobbing again.

(Ha Jin, "In the Kindergarten")

c. Then her daddy started crying again....  
(Steve Yarbrough, "The Rest of Her Life")

d. When the plan was announced in June, Sogo sales started slumping, right in the middle of the summer gift-giving season....  
(*TIME*, July 31, 2000)

Then, how frequently is an intentional or unintentional meaning implied in the infinitive and the gerund, although there are cases that are too ambiguous to decide whether it is an intentional or unintentional meaning that is implied? Therefore, it would be only a general tendency that can be grasped in such an attempt.

Table 1 gives an approximate number of instances of intentional or unintentional meaning implied in the infinitive or gerund in spoken and written English.

Table 1. An intentional or unintentional meaning in begin (*start*) *to-V*

	An implied meaning	Begin <i>to-V</i>	Start <i>to-V</i>	Total
Spoken Eng. ( <i>The Story of a Hospital</i> )	An intentional meaning	9	17	26
	An unintentional meaning	10	3	13
	(Ambiguous in meaning)	(5)	(1)	(6)
Written Eng. ( <i>The Best American Short Stories 1999</i> )	An intentional meaning	23	12	35
	An unintentional meaning	34	7	41
	(Ambiguous in meaning)	(10)	(10)	(20)

Table 2. An intentional or unintentional meaning in begin (*start*) *V-ing*

	An implied meaning	Begin <i>V-ing</i>	Start <i>V-ing</i>	Total
Spoken Eng. ( <i>The Story of a Hospital</i> )	An intentional meaning	11	43	54
	An unintentional meaning	1	8	9
	(Ambiguous in meaning)	(1)	(10)	(11)
Written Eng. ( <i>The Best American Short Stories 1999</i> )	An intentional meaning	12	18	30
	An unintentional meaning	5	12	17
	(Ambiguous in meaning)	(3)	(4)	(7)

Table 1 shows that in spoken English in the infinitive an intentional meaning is implied more often than an unintentional meaning, and that in written English an intentional meaning is implied almost as often as an unintentional meaning. That contradicts what Declerck argues. Table 2 suggests that, although in the gerund in spoken English an intentional meaning is implied more frequently than an unintentional meaning, in written English an unintentional meaning is also implied in the gerund rather frequently. This also differs from what Declerck says.

All of this might imply that it is somewhat inappropriate to differentiate between the infinitive and the gerund based on intentional or unintentional meaning.

## 2.2. Repetition

### 2.2.1. Repetition over an unspecified period

Declerck (1991: 506) says that the infinitive is used "to express a habit, i.e. the repetition of situations of the same kind on different occasions over an unspecified period." And he cites the following:

(6) Two years ago John began to work. He still does.

When the same kind of situation is repeated on different occasions over an unspecified period, there are numerous instances of them in which the infinitive is used in lieu of the gerund, just as Declerck says, like the following :

- (7) a. He began to sleep in the days and stay up late at night.  
(Lorrie Moore, "Real Estate")  
b. He grew...and he started to speak English.  
(*The New Yorker*, July 17, 2000)  
c. I started to buy them when I was sixteen.  
(Ina Yalof, *The Story of a Hospital*)  
d. When you're on Patient Information, you begin to get familiar with names of people.... (ibid.)

However, there are also instances in which the gerund is used in such cases, like those in (8). In these instances *at least once a day, often, every time, and sometimes* mean "on different occasions."

- (8) a. My brother began stopping by her house at least once a day to give updates....  
(*Reader's Digest*, July 2000)  
b. "We often wake up in the morning and just start talking," says Pam. (ibid.)  
c. Every time I dip into the water for a swim, some Mediterranean Messenger of Love start rapping to her.  
(Junot Diaz, "The Sun, the Moon, the Stars")  
d. "But sometimes she starts talking right in the middle of a song."  
(Tim Gautreaux, "The Piano Tuner")

All of this shows that in order to suggest repeated action on different occasions over an unspecified period, the gerund is used almost as often as the infinitive. This is an argument that also disagrees with what Declerck explains.

### 2.2.2. Repetition over a specified period

Declerck says that the gerund is used "to express repetition of a situation within a single period of time." In fact, as he says, when we want to express repeated action within a single period of time, there are instances in which the gerund is used. In all of the following instances each action is performed over a specified period.

- (9) a. When you're a four-year student, you start interviewing early in that year for the places....  
(Ina Yalof, *The Story of a Hospital*)

- b. They had walked about 30 metres when three teenagers came out of the crowds and started punching Scott in an unprovoked attack.

(*Reader's Digest*, July 2000)

- c. ...but as he again tried to pull the woman out of the street, she removed one of her shoes and began beating in the face with it. (ibid.)  
d. Once the top starts jiggling, he says, it'll be done in fifteen minutes.

(*The New Yorker*, July 17, 2000)

However, contrary to what Declerck says, to imply repetitive action within a single period of time, the infinitive seems to be used as frequently as the gerund. In all of the following instances, the action is performed over a specified period.

- (10) a. Immediately he started to set up ground rules. "I make telephone calls, I use the bathroom, I don't use a commode."  
(Ina Yalof, *The Story of a Hospital*)  
b. Her patience did not last long, though, and soon she began to shift restlessly in her seat. (ibid.)  
c. For some reason, about 100 meters into the race, Schwartz began to let out war whoops.... (*Reader's Digest*, July 2000)  
d. Ruth began to shriek. "Get out of here! Get out of here right now! All of you!..." (Lorrie Moore, "Real Estate")

All of this suggests again that it would be meaningless to make a distinction between the infinitive and the gerund in terms of repetition over a specified or an unspecified period. Declerck seems to have brought into his discussion too strictly the idea of time distinction like "over an unspecified period" or "over a specified period." This kind of timeframe seems to be unnecessary.

All in all, Declerck does not seem to have been very successful in differentiating in meaning between *begin (start)+infinitive* and *begin (start)+gerund*. It would be necessary to differentiate them from a different point of view.

## 3. Some Major Differences between Begin (Start) to-V and Begin (Start) V-ing

### 3.1. Potentiality and performance

Quirk et al. (1985 : 1192) say that in (11a) and (11b), there is no observable difference of meaning between *start+infinitive* and *start+gerund*.

- (11) a. Lucy started to write while in hospital.  
 b. Lucy started writing while in hospital.

They say, however, that in (12a) and (12b) there is a difference in meaning between the two. That is, (12a) suggests that the activity may not yet have begun, while in (12b) the activity is already ongoing.

- (12) a. He started to speak, but stopped because she objected.  
 b. He started speaking, and kept on for more than an hour.

Quirk et al. (1985 : 1192) call what *started*+infinitive in (12a) implies "potentiality" and what *started*+gerund in (12b) implies "performance." The differentiation of this kind between "potentiality" and "performance" can also be seen in Jacobs (1995 : 298). Jacobs says that, in (13a) the complaining may not yet have begun, while in (13b) the complaining is ongoing. Thus (13a) might show potentiality, and (13b) performance.

- (13) a. Humphrey started to complain.  
 b. Humphrey started complaining.

He says further that (14a) "allows for the interpretation that Humphrey had not yet uttered his complaint," whereas in (14b) "the first syllable or more of the complaint had been uttered," and thus the gerund "represents a more fully realized activity."

- (14) a. Humphrey started to complain but changed his mind when he saw the plum pudding and custard.  
 b. Humphrey started complaining but changed his mind when he saw the plum pudding and custard.

A study based on my corpus also clearly shows that there are instances in which *start*+infinitive implies potentiality. (15a) shows that Claude tried to say that the woman needed a boy friend, but in reality, she did not say so. The spaced periods (...) in the first sentence in (15a) also vindicates that. In (15b) the first *started to say* suggests potentiality, whereas the second *started to sing* implies a kind of performance :

- (15) a. Claude picked up a screwdriver, "You ought to get out more. A woman your age needs..." He started to say that she needed a boyfriend, but then he looked around at the dry-rotted curtains, the twelve-foot ceilings lined with dusty plaster molding....  
 (Tim Gautreaux, "The Piano Tuner")

- b. An injured little smile came to her lips. She straightened her back and started to say something to him, but instead she looked at Claude, at his embarrassed and hopeful face. Then, to his amazement, she started to sing, and people looked up as though Patsy Cline had come back, but without her country accent, and the whole room got quiet to listen. "Crazy," Michelle sang, soft as midnight fog outside a bedroom window, "crazy for feeling so lonely."  
 (ibid.)

In connection with this problem of potentiality and performance, there is something that has to be added here. Is this potentiality confined only to *start*+infinitive? Does *begin*+infinitive not suggest it? Yasui et al. (1987 : 173-75) say so. They argue that *begin*+infinitive does not imply potentiality. They say that (16b) has the meanings expressed in both in (17a) and (17b), but that (16a) has only the meaning expressed in (17a).

- (16) a. Barbara began to study for her exams last week.  
 b. Barbara started to study for her exams last week.  
 (17) a. Barbara did some studying for her exams last week.  
 b. Barbara started to study for her exams last week but then she didn't do any studying.

However, Yasui et al. seem to be wrong. Although *start*+infinitive seems to imply potentiality more often than *begin*+infinitive does, *begin*+infinitive also seems to suggest potentiality. Jespersen (1909-49, V : 196) says that "*Begin to* sometimes implies that an action is interrupted or not finished." Additionally, in the quotation that Wierzbicka (1988 : 85) cites from Dixon (1984b : 591), Dixon says in connection with (18a) that "to be appropriate, Mary must have rained at least a few blows on John (...)," but Dixon says concerning (18b) that (18b) "could be said when she had merely raised the stick but had not yet brought it down upon his head (perhaps she will, or perhaps she won't)."

- (18) a. Mary began hitting John.  
 b. Mary began to hit John.

Furthermore, it is highly probable that in (19) *began*+infinitive implies potentiality.

- (19) She began to say something, then changed her mind.

(*The Kenkyusha Dict. of English Collocations*)

### 3.2. A point in time and duration in time

I believe that the fundamental difference between *begin (start)+infinitive* and *begin (start)+gerund* would be the difference between a point in time and duration in time. In *begin (start)+infinitive* the emphasis is placed on a point in time, whereas in *begin (start)+gerund* it is placed on duration in time. Yule (1998 : 224) says that "Activities and processes are events that have duration, and we could simply say that the gerund is strongly preferred when we refer to duration in time." He goes on saying that "The infinitive seems to be preferred when a point of time (i.e. not duration) is being referred to as a beginning..." And he quotes the following :

- (20) I turned the key and the engine suddenly started to splutter into life.

Yule continues saying that the infinitive is also used when the point in time is the start of a possible series like (21a), which means possible repeated action, and that the gerund is preferred when the repeated action is not a possible, but an actual, ongoing event like (21b).

- (21) a. He begins to sneeze if a cat comes near him.  
b. He begins sneezing if a cat even comes into the same room.

Quirk et al. (1985 : 1192) say much the same thing. They call this repeated action "multiple activities," and say that when the multiple activities are involved, the gerund, which has the progressive aspect, is preferred. They say that in (22) the gerund is more appropriate than the infinitive.

- (22) a. He began to open all the cupboards.  
b. He began opening all the cupboards.

#### 3.2.1. Adverbs or adverbials and a point in time or duration in time

##### 3.2.1.1. Adverbs or adverbials and a point in time

Generally, *suddenly* co-occurs with the infinitive.

- (23) a. Suddenly his vision began to tunnel, he started to sweat, and...he collapsed.

(Joan E. Lloyd and Edwin B. Herman, *Dial 911*)

- b. Suddenly, with no coaxing, the child, a boy, begins to wail.

(Ina Yalof, *The Story of a Hospital*)

- c. He suddenly began to shake uncontrollably, then, with an effort, relaxed.

(*COBUILD ON CD-ROM*)

- d. Suddenly the room started to spin and the air became so thick that it was hard to breathe.

(Joan E. Lloyd and Edwin B. Herman, *Dial 911*)

Semantically *suddenly* suggests a point in time, and *begin (start)+infinitive* also suggests a point in time, because in *begin (start)+infinitive* the emphasis is put on an inceptive moment, i.e. a point in time. That explains why *suddenly* is compatible with the infinitive. And it also explains at the same time why there are more instances in which *suddenly* co-occurs with the infinitive more often than with the gerund, the latter of which implies duration in time, not a point in time. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the co-occurrence of *suddenly* with the gerund is unthinkable. Although instances are few, *suddenly* or *all of a sudden* or *all at once* can co-occur with the gerund.

- (24) a. Now here she was modelling in the nude and suddenly a couple of teachers, who'd never appeared in life-drawing before, started coming to classes.

(*COBUILD ON CD-ROM*)

- b. "I thought something was wrong when all of a sudden he started drinking water nonstop," says Michelle, a nutritionist. (*Newsweek*, Nov. 4, 2000)

- c. All at once several boys started chasing the rabbit, which turned out to have a crippled hind leg.

(Ha Jin, "In the Kindergarten")

However, *begin (start)+gerund* in itself suggests duration in time that is incompatible with a point of time *suddenly* implies. It may easily explain why *suddenly* is used less frequently with the gerund.

##### 3.2.1.2. Adverbs or adverbials and duration in time

*Always, often, usually, regularly, every morning*, etc. are semantically opposite to *suddenly, all of a sudden, or all at once*. While such adverbs as *suddenly* imply a point in time, such adverbs or adverbials as *always, often, usually, regularly, every morning, would* (past habits), suggest habitual activities, or duration in time. It means that these latter adverbs or adverbials tend to co-occur with the gerund as the examples in (25) clearly show.

- (25) a. Rhoda's one who always starts swinging.

(Ina Yalof, *The Story of a Hospital*)

- b. As you start mowing more often, reassess your lawn.

(COBUILD ON CD-ROM)

- c. Patients usually start talking to me as soon as the elevator doors close.

(Ina Yalof, *The Story of a Hospital*)

- d. People started singing and writing to me all the time, asking me to be on all sorts of different television and radio programmes....

(COBUILD ON CD-ROM)

- e. Among other jobs in the glasshouse, do not forget to start regularly watering cyclamen corms to bring them into life again.

(ibid.)

- f. After Coleman completed his overnight guard duty, he said he started cleaning toilets every morning.

(*The New Yorker*, July 3, 2000)

- g. Every time I moved my finger just a millimeter, the blood would start welling out and one of the surgeons would say, "I don't want to be melodramatic."

(Ina Yalof, *The Story of a Hospital*)

This does not mean, however, that the co-occurrence of *always*, *often*, *usually*, etc. with the infinitive is not possible. Examples like (26) can be found in which these adverbs co-occur with the infinitive, but these adverbs of frequency tend to co-occur with the gerund more often.

- (26) Very often a four-year-old child will begin to talk about dying.

(ibid.)

### 3.3. Spoken and written English

Generally, in spoken English *start* occurs more frequently than *begin*, the reason probably being that *start* is less formal than *begin*. Then what about *start*+infinitive or *start*+gerund? Which one occurs more often?

Tables 3 and 4 give an approximate number of instances of each form in spoken and written English.

Table 3 Spoken Eng.  
(*The Story of a Hospital*)

Begin <i>to-V</i>	24
Start <i>to-V</i>	20
Begin <i>V-ing</i>	12
Start <i>V-ing</i>	50

Table 4 Written Eng.  
(*The Best Amer. Short Stories 1999*)

Begin <i>to-V</i>	61
Start <i>to-V</i>	21
Begin <i>V-ing</i>	20
Start <i>V-ing</i>	33

Tables 3 and 4 show that in spoken English *start*+gerund occurs most frequently of the four forms, and that in written English *begin*+infinitive appears most often of the four forms. These findings of mine are totally in accordance with Biber et al. (1999 : 704, 741) and *LDOCE* (s.v. *begin* and *start*), the latter of which is based on the British National Corpus and the Longman Lancaster Corpus.

Then why is *start*+gerund used most frequently in spoken English and why is *begin*+infinitive used most often in written English? No one seems to have given an answer to the question. One of the reasons might be that *start* is preferred in spoken English and *begin* in written English. Another reason would be their way of pronunciation. That is, *start doing* and *begin to do* are much easier to pronounce than the other forms, say, *start to do* or *begin doing*. In *start to do*, the [t] sound occurs three times, whereas in *begin doing* the [gin] sound is closely followed by another, similar [iŋ] sound, all of which might make it a little awkward to pronounce them. And that might possibly make people choose another different form.

### 4. Conclusion

In this article I first stated the inappropriateness of Declerck's differentiation between *begin (start)*+infinitive and *begin (start)*+gerund. Then I argued that *begin (start)*+infinitive can imply potentiality and *begin (start)*+gerund performance, that in *begin (start)*+infinitive the emphasis is put on a point in time, while in *begin (start)*+gerund it is put on duration in time, and that in spoken English *start*+gerund is used most often, whereas in written English *begin*+infinitive is used most frequently.

### NOTES

1. Ina Yalof, *The Story of a Hospital* (New York : Random House, 1988). The author of this book met with 74 physicians, nurses, and other health-related personnel who work at a large hospital in New York City, and had them talk freely about their jobs, their daily lives, their view of life and other

things, taping these conversations with them, and she later transcribed them word for word into the 357-page book. In my study the descriptive parts in this book were excluded.

2. Amy Tan and Katrina Kenison, ed., *The Best American Short Stories 1999* (Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1999). This is a collection of short stories by 21 American authors. In my study the conversational parts in this book were excluded.

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## Begin (Start) *to-V* と Begin (Start) *V-ing* における意味の相違

園田 健二

**要旨** begin (start) *to-V* と begin(start) *V-ing* の意味の相違について、最初は Declerck (1991) が示した双方の間の相違について批判し、その後、potentiality と performance, a point in time と duration in time などの観点から双方の相違を検討した。この point of time と duration in time は begin(start) *to-V* と begin(start) *V-ing* の意味の根本的な相違を示すもので、point in time を示す begin(start) *to-V* は suddenly, all at once のような語と共起し、duration in time を示す begin(start) *V-ing* は always, often, usually, regularly などと共起している。

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