

5D: The Gerund and Gerundive

The Gerund

[Reading Latin grammar section 175]

Introduction

The gerund is a neuter singular abstract verbal noun of the second declension that occurs only in the oblique (i.e. non-nominative) cases. Like the infinitive, it refers in the abstract to the action indicated by a verb. It is active in meaning. Its equivalent in English ends in -ing (“reading”, “running”, “eating”, etc.). Its use in Latin is best illustrated by example.

Consider the sentence:

“Reading books is a great pleasure for me.”

The subject of this sentence is the abstract verbal phrase, “reading books.” In Latin, this sentence would be rendered:

legere librōs mihi magnae uoluptātī est.

Note how Latin expresses the abstract verbal phrase, “reading books,” via the infinitive phrase, *legere librōs*, which stands as the equivalent of a nominative subject.

Now consider the sentence:

“I have a desire for reading books.”

Latin would express this notion as:

cupiō legere librōs.

Note that here the infinitive phrase acts as the equivalent of a direct object in the accusative.

So far so good. But what if we want to say something like the following:

“He/She displays great fondness for reading books.”

The phrase, “fondness for *x*,” is best represented in Latin by *studium* + the genitive (“zeal of/for *x*”). In this instance Latin does not use the infinitive to express the notion, “of reading books,” but instead turns to the gerund.

Forming the Gerund

To form the gerund: take the nom. masc. sing. of the present active participle, drop the final -s, and add *-dum*.¹ No nominative forms exist, but otherwise the gerund is a regular second declension neuter singular noun. This yields:

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	3rd/4th
acc.	amandum	habendum	dūcendum	audiendum	capiendum
gen.	amandī	habendī	dūcendī	audiendī	capiendī
dat.	amandō	habendō	dūcendō	audiendō	capiendō
abl.	amandō	habendō	dūcendō	audiendō	capiendō

(The gerund of *eō, ire* is irregular: *eundum*. Deponent verbs also have gerunds, formed exactly like the gerunds of the active verbs of the same conjugation. Thus *hortandum, pollicendum, utendum*, etc.)

¹More properly: the gerund is formed by a combination of verb stem + thematic vowel(s) + *ndum*.

Using the Gerund

The gerund is a verbal noun. It therefore displays the qualities of both a noun *and* a verb. As a noun, it has a specific case that will indicate its role in the syntax of the sentence. As a *verbal* noun, however, it also can take an object. Thus the phrase, “fondness for reading books,” would be expressed in Latin as:

studium legendī librōs

Here the gerund (*legendī*) is in the genitive case because it depends on *studium* (see previous page). On the other hand, *librōs* is in the accusative case because it is the direct object of *legendī*.

By contrast, the phrase, “by sparing enemies,” would be rendered as:

parcendō hostibus

Here the gerund is in the ablative to indicate instrument or means; *hostibus* is in the dative because *parcō* takes an indirect object in the dative.

If, instead, we had wanted to say, “by using slaves,” we would write:

ūtendō seruīs

Again the gerund is in the ablative (note that *ūtor* is a deponent verb); *seruīs* is also in the ablative because *utor* takes an object in the ablative.

Examples of the Gerund in Action

operam dat legendō librōs.

“He/She gives attention to reading books.”

uēnit ad legendum librōs.

“He/She came with a view to reading books/ in order to read books.”
[Note the use of *ad* + the accusative of the gerund to indicate purpose.]

ōtium petit legendī librōs causā.

“He/She seeks leisure for the sake of reading books.”
[Note the use of *causā* (abl.) + the genitive of the gerund to indicate purpose.]

discimus legendō librōs.

“We learn by means of reading books.”

hoc locūtus est dē legendō librōs.

“He said this concerning the reading of books.”

amor uīuendī turpis est.

“Love of life [‘of living’] is base.”

omnia fēcit ad benē uīuendum.

“He/She did everything with a view to living well.”
[I.e. everything he/she did, he/she did with a view to his/her own pleasure.]

The Gerundive

[Reading Latin grammar sections 160-161]

Introduction

The gerundive is a regular 1st/2nd declension verbal adjective: thus it is a participle. It is identical in form to the gerund, but (as an adjective) occurs in all cases and genders, and in both the singular and plural. Unlike the gerund, the gerundive is passive in sense. (Thus it is often referred to — misleadingly — as the “future passive participle.” In fact, it is the adjectival counterpart to the gerund.) The gerundive has two main uses.

1) Gerundive for Gerund

In constructions such as those on page 2 where the gerund itself takes an object, Latin will tend to substitute a construction with the gerundive employed as an attributive adjective. Consider the sentence:

operam dat legendō librōs.
“He/She gives attention to reading books.”

Here we have the gerund *legendō* in the dative as the indirect object of the phrase *operam dat*, with *librōs* tacked on as the object, in turn, of *legendō*. Thus is rather inelegant. (Believe it or not, the Romans do like to be direct on occasion.) To get around this, what they will do in such cases is take *librōs*, change it to the dative *librīs*, and thus make *it* the object of the phrase *operam dat* (yielding the phrase: “he/she gives attention to books”); they then add the gerundive in the masculine dative plural to agree with *librīs*. This results in:

operam dat librīs legendīs.
Literally: “He/She gives attention to books having the act of reading applied to them.”
[Here the English phrase, “the act of reading being applied,” is a rendering of the gerundive *legendīs*.]
Sense: “He/She gives attention to reading books.” [same as with the gerund]

Compare the following sentences from page 2, here transformed into the equivalent sentences with the gerundive. (I have provided a literal translation of the latter.) In each example the two constructions yield the exact same meaning.

Gerund: *uēnit ad legendum librōs.*
Gerundive: *uēnit ad librōs legendōs.*
[“He/She came with a view to books having an act of reading applied to them.” — i.e., to read books]

Gerund: *studium legendī librōs*
Gerundive: *studium librōrum legendōrum*
[“zeal of/for books having an act of reading applied to them” — i.e., of/for reading books]

Gerund: *ōtium petit legendī librōs causā.*
Gerundive: *ōtium petit librōrum legendōrum causā.*
[“He/She seeks leisure for the sake of books having an act of reading applied to them.” — i.e., of reading books]

Gerund: *discimus legendō librōs.*
Gerundive: *discimus librīs legendīs.*
[“We learn by means of books having an act of reading applied to them.” — i.e., by reading books]

Gerund: *hoc locūtus est dē legendō librōs.*
Gerundive: *hoc locūtus est dē librīs legendīs.*
[“He/She said this concerning books having an act of reading applied to them.” — i.e. concerning the reading of books]

In each instance, the gerundive is inserted as the passive, adjectival correlative to the active, substantival gerund. The construction with the gerundive is much more vivid, to the degree that it allows the immediate focus to be placed on the noun (“books”) rather than on the abstract action (“reading”).

2) The Passive Periphrastic

Often the gerundive is employed to indicate obligation or necessity. This is particularly true when the gerundive is employed as the complement of the verb *sum*, which yields a construction known as the **Passive Periphrastic**. Here the gerundive is used as a predicate adjective. Examples are provided below.

hoc est faciendum mihi.

Literally: “This thing is to be done for me/as far as I am concerned.”

Sense: “I must do this.”

hic liber legendus est mihi.

Literally: “This book is to be read for me/as far as I am concerned.”

Sense: “I must read this book.”

Note that in each of these sentences the gerundive is employed as a predicate adjective, the complement of *sum*. In each, the construction implies that the action indicated represents an obligation, necessity, duty, etc. for someone. The person so obliged, etc. is indicated in the dative case: the so-called **Dative of Agent** (really a dative of reference but used here in a specific context).

Notes

1) The Passive Periphrastic can be used with no agent indicated:

militēs erant reuocandī.

“The soldiers were to be recalled.” — i.e. they had to be recalled.

2) Like other passive constructions, the Passive Periphrastic can be used impersonally:

parcendum est fēminīs.

“It is to be spared to the women.” — i.e. the women must be spared.

Note that, in instances such as this one where the verb in the gerundive itself takes a dative, the agent will be indicated in the usual way by *ā/ab* + the ablative, in order to avoid potential confusion:

fēminīs parcendum est ā mē.

“It is to be spared to the women by me.” — i.e. the women must be spared by me.

3) The gerundive can be used as a predicate adjective (without *sum*) to indicate purpose:

trādidit nōs necandōs.

“He/She handed us over to be killed.” — i.e. in order that we might be killed.

Final Note: Gerund vs. Gerundive

The relation between the gerund and the gerundive is curious. One way of understanding it is to view the gerund as an *impersonal* use of the gerundive: just as the phrase *itum est* yields, “it was gone” or “an act of going was engaged in,” so the gerund *scrībendum* (as in: *ars scrībendī* — “the art of writing”) can be regarded as meaning “it being written” or “an act of writing being engaged in” (thus *ars scrībendī* would literally mean “the art of it being written” or “the art of an act of writing being engaged in”).

This explains the fact that the gerund appears only in the neuter singular (cf. e.g. the impersonal *itur*, *itum est*, etc.). It also explains the curious switch from passive to active as one moves from gerundive to gerund.

Looking at the matter in this way, you can see why the Romans avoided using the gerund with an object (see page 3): where in English the gerund is an independent verb form, in Latin it is merely a specialized, impersonal use of the gerundive employed to refer, in the abstract, to the action indicated by a particular verb. Thus a sentence such as, *discimus legendō librōs*, would mean, literally, “We learn by means of a reading (books) being engaged in,” with *librōs* a retained accusative similar to the accusative in, “*Cicerō, ā legātis cunta ēdoctus ...*” [reading 5Cii, line 118] — quite awkward.

This also explains why there is no nominative form of the gerund in use, since the result would be the sort of impersonal construction discussed in note 2 above: i.e., the result would be a neuter, impersonal version of the passive periphrastic.