B2 GRAMMAR LESSON

Three Functions of -ING Forms

Reduced relative clauses • Simultaneous actions • Gerunds

Lesson aim
Understand how -ing forms work in different structures and use them naturally in speaking and writing.

The key idea

The same -ing form can have different grammatical functions. To identify its function, ask what job the -ing phrase is doing in the sentence.

1. Does it describe a noun? → Reduced relative clause
2. Does it describe an additional action happening at the same time? → Simultaneous-action clause
3. Does it function like a noun? → Gerund

1. -ING forms as reduced relative clauses

An -ing form can describe a noun and give us more information about a person, place or thing. It can shorten an active relative clause containing who / which / that + be, or an active relative clause where the noun is doing the action.

Lesson example

There are some people digging for clams.
= There are some people who are digging for clams.

More examples

Full relative clause	Reduced relative clause
The girl who is swimming is my sister.	The girl swimming is my sister.
People who live near the sea often enjoy water sports.	People living near the sea often enjoy water sports.
The man who is selling ice cream is friendly.	The man selling ice cream is friendly.
The children who are playing on the beach look happy.	The children playing on the beach look happy.

How to identify it: Ask, “What does the -ing phrase describe?” If it describes a noun, it is functioning as a reduced relative clause.

Useful patterns: people working abroad • children playing outside • tourists visiting the island • someone waiting for you

CCQs
1. In “people digging for clams”, what are the people doing?

2. Does “digging for clams” describe the people or the beach?
3. Can we replace it with “who are digging for clams”?

2. -ING forms describing simultaneous actions

An -ing clause can describe an additional action happening at the same time as the main action. This is especially useful in storytelling because it makes descriptions more concise and vivid.

Lesson example

We’d run around, playing in the sand, not caring.

Main action: We’d run around.
Additional actions: playing in the sand; not caring.
The -ing phrases add information about what was happening during the same period.

More examples

• She walked along the beach, listening to her favourite music.
• The children were running around, laughing and shouting.
• He sat by the window, looking at the rain.
• We spent the afternoon swimming in the sea, enjoying the sunshine and talking about our childhood.

Notice the commas

When the additional -ing information comes after the main clause, it is often separated by a comma. When the -ing clause comes at the beginning, we normally use a comma after it too.

Walking along the beach, I found a beautiful shell.
I found a beautiful shell, walking along the beach.

Important: avoid dangling participles. The understood subject of the -ing clause should normally be the same as the subject of the main clause.
Clear: Walking along the beach, I saw a dolphin.
Unclear: Walking along the beach, a dolphin appeared. (This suggests the dolphin was walking.)

CCQs
1. In “She sat on the sofa, watching TV”, what was she doing?
2. Did she watch TV while sitting on the sofa?
3. Why is there a comma?
4. Who was walking in “Walking along the beach, I found a shell”?

3. -ING forms as the subject or object of a verb

When an -ing form functions like a noun, it is called a gerund. It can be the subject of a sentence or the object of a verb.

A. -ING as the subject

The -ing form comes at the beginning of the sentence and tells us what the sentence is about.

Lesson-related example
Playing on the beach was one of my happiest childhood memories.

More examples
• Travelling makes people more open-minded.
• Swimming is a great way to relax.
• Spending time with family makes me happy.

• Learning a new language takes patience.
• Exploring new places can be exciting.

Pattern: -ing form + verb + the rest of the sentence

B. -ING as the object of a verb

Some verbs are followed by an -ing form. The gerund completes the meaning of the main verb.

Lesson example
I remember sitting outside.
Main verb: remember • Object: sitting outside

Verb	Example
Enjoy	I enjoy walking on the beach.
Avoid	She avoids talking about her problems.
Remember	I remember visiting that island.
Consider	We’re considering moving abroad.
Suggest	He suggested going for a swim.
Finish	I’ve finished writing my essay.
Imagine	Imagine living by the sea!
Mind	Would you mind opening the window?
Admit	She admitted making a mistake.
Practise	He practises speaking English every day.

B2 note: remember + -ing vs. remember + to-infinitive
I remember swimming in the sea as a child. = I have a memory of that past experience.
Remember to call your mother. = Don’t forget to do something.

4. Compare the three functions

Sentence	Function
The people digging for clams looked happy.	Reduced relative clause
We ran around, playing in the sand.	Simultaneous action
Playing in the sand was my favourite activity.	Subject (gerund)
I remember playing in the sand.	Object (gerund)
The children swimming in the sea are my students.	Reduced relative clause
She lay on the beach, enjoying the sunshine.	Simultaneous action

5. Practice: identify the function

Choose the correct function for each bold -ing phrase: reduced relative clause, simultaneous action, subject (gerund) or object (gerund).

1. The tourists taking photographs are from Germany.

Function: _____

2. Walking along the beach, I found a beautiful shell.

Function: _____

3. Travelling helps people understand different cultures.

Function: _____

4. I enjoy spending time near the ocean.

Function: _____

5. The woman selling souvenirs was very friendly.

Function: _____

6. We sat by the sea, watching the waves.

Function: _____

6. Speaking practice – B2 challenge

Task 1 – Describe people
Describe three people you might see in a busy city. Use at least two reduced relative clauses.
Example: People working remotely often prefer quiet cafés.

Task 2 – Tell a story
Describe a memorable experience using at least three -ing clauses to show simultaneous actions.
Example: Walking through the old town, I came across a traditional market.

Task 3 – Give your opinion
Discuss these questions. Use gerunds as subjects and objects.
• What activities help people reduce stress?
• Do you enjoy learning new skills?
• What do you avoid doing when you’re busy?
• Is travelling more valuable than studying?

7. Freer speaking – discussion questions

1. What are the biggest challenges facing people living in modern cities?
2. Do you think spending time alone is important?
3. What can people learn from travelling abroad?
4. Have you ever met someone doing something completely unexpected?
5. What activities do you enjoy doing in your free time?
6. What changes would you make to improve the education system?
7. What do you think about people constantly checking their phones while socialising?

8. Final production challenge

Topic: “Living a meaningful and balanced life”
Prepare a 1–2 minute talk. Include:
• Two reduced relative clauses
• Two -ing clauses describing simultaneous actions
• Two gerunds as subjects
• Two gerunds as objects

Teacher’s model answer

Living a meaningful life requires making conscious decisions. People working in demanding jobs often struggle to find enough time for themselves. Spending time with family and developing personal interests are both important. Walking in nature, listening to music or simply enjoying a quiet evening can help people feel more relaxed. I personally enjoy learning new things and avoid spending too much time on social media. Ultimately, creating a balanced lifestyle means recognising what really matters and making time for the things that bring us happiness.

Teacher tip: Don’t teach these as three unrelated rules. Ask students to identify the role of the -ing phrase: Does it describe a noun? Does it add a simultaneous action? Or does it function like a noun? This helps students understand the grammar rather than simply memorise examples.