

Russian Grammar? Really?

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Незачем: there's no need

Hello there, language lovers! Today we're starting with a reader survey. What do you hate to do most of all? a) clean out the cat litter box; b) have a tooth pulled without anesthetic; c) spend a day at the car registration office; d) study Russian grammar

If you answered a) through c) — you're in luck! We're going to look at Russian grammar — the fun option.

Yeah, yeah, I know. But every once in a while it's good to get some grammatical clarification so that you don't sound like an idiot when you are trying to make a good impression.

There is one grammatical situation that continues to flummox me. I almost always sound like an idiot when I have to use an infinitive verb, i.e., the “to” form, like *писать* or *написать* (to write, imperfective and perfective). The bit I get wrong is figuring out if it should be *писать* (imperfective) or *написать* (perfective) after another verb.

For example, I want to describe what happened at an event, when someone from the audience stood up and began to recite poetry. Он встал и начал (He stood up and began)....long pause as I run through options in my head...читать стихи (to recite poetry — imperfective)....прочитать стихи (to recite poetry, perfective)...mutter mutter hope no one notices that I've blended both forms and tried to hide it with a loud cough.

The muttering and coughing were getting embarrassing. So I had the brilliant idea of looking it up. Reference books — what a clever idea. Who thought them up?

I discovered some rules that make this easier.

First up, always use the imperfective infinitive — like *писать* (to write); *говорить* (to speak); *ходить* (to go) — with verbs that indicate changing a state or condition, like beginning and ending, getting into or out of a habit, getting tired of or sick of something, avoiding, and falling in and out of love.

That means my first guess was right: Он встал и начал читать стихи (He stood up and

began to recite — imperfective — poetry.)

Here are some examples of getting used to something: Я стала заниматься в фитнес клубе каждое утро. (I've begun to work out in the gym every morning.) Я постепенно привыкала вставать рано утром и ходить в фитнес клуб. (I gradually got used to getting up early in the morning and going to the gym.) Как ни странно, я полюбила заниматься спортом по утрам. (This is weird, but I began to love working out in the morning.) Ему надоело вставать рано, а мне — нет (He got sick of getting up early, but I haven't.)

In addition to those verbs, these verbs always take the imperfective infinitive, too: кончать/кончить (to end); прекращать/прекратить (to cease); переставать/перестать (to stop); продолжать (to continue); отвыкать/отвыкнуть (to get out of the habit); разлюбить (to fall out of love); научиться and разучиться (to learn and unlearn /forget how; уставать/устать (to get tired of something); избегать (to avoid).

There's another hard and fast rule about always and only using the imperfective form of the infinitive verb. Unfortunately it has a rather opaque name that might not be comprehensible if you don't spend your free time reading grammar books: statements of inexpediency.

That means, in layman's terms, general statements about something not being a great idea. We'll call them Nice No statements.

These are phrases like не надо (you shouldn't): Не надо мне рассказывать про усталость! (Don't tell me about how tired you are!) Or не сто́ит (not worth it): Не сто́ит жаловаться — всё равно мы идём в фитнес клуб (There's no point complaining — we're going to the gym anyway.) Не к чему спорить со мной! (There's no use arguing with me.) Нечего меня уговаривать — идём и всё (It's no use to try to persuade me — we're going and that's that.) And after a great work out: Незачем меня благодарить (There's nothing to thank me for.)

The Nice No phrases include notions of harm and futility: Вредно курить! (Smoking is bad for you, literally "it's harmful to smoke.") Бесполезно с ним обсуждать этот вопрос — он упёртый (It's useless to discuss that issue with him — he's stubborn.)

Не надоело заниматься русской грамматикой? (Are you sick of studying Russian grammar?)

Окай, окай — хватит (that's enough). But there will be a pop quiz at the end of the summer.

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