

Unit 58

Infinitive or -ing?(3) - be afraid, need, help

a Be afraid to do and be afraid of -ing

I am afraid to do something = I don't want to do something because it is dangerous or the result could be unpleasant:

- The streets in this city are not safe at night. Many people are **afraid to go out alone**. (= they don't want to go out alone because it is dangerous)
- She was **afraid to tell** her parents that she had broken the neighbour's window. (= she didn't want to tell her parents because she knew they would be angry)

I am afraid of something happening = there is a possibility that something bad will happen:

- We walked along the path very carefully because it was icy and we were **afraid of falling**. (*not* 'afraid to fall')
- I don't like dogs. I'm always **afraid of being** bitten. (*not* 'afraid to be bitten')

So, you are afraid **to do** something because you are afraid of **something happening** as a result. Compare:

- The boys were afraid **to play** football in the garden because they were afraid **of breaking** a window.
- I was afraid **to stay** in the sun because I was afraid **of getting** burnt.

b Need to do and need -ing

I need to do something = it is necessary for me to do something:

- I **need to take** more exercise.
- He **needs to work** harder.
- I don't **need to come** to the meeting, do I?

Need -ing = need to be done (so the meaning is *passive*):

- The batteries in this radio **need changing**. (= need to be changed)
- This jacket is rather dirty. It **needs cleaning**. (= needs to be cleaned)
- Do you think the grass **needs cutting**? (= needs to be cut)

c Help

Help is followed by the infinitive with or without **to**:

- Everybody **helped (to) clean** up after the party.
- Can somebody **help me (to) move** this table?

But there is also an expression '**can't help doing** something.' **I can't help doing something** = I can't stop myself from doing something:

- I tried to be serious but I **couldn't help laughing**.
- I'm sorry I broke the glass. Someone pushed me and I **couldn't help dropping** it.
- He is stupid but it's not his fault. He **can't help being** stupid.