Choosing Between Infinitive and Gerund: "To do" or "doing"?

My doctor   *asked me*   *to try*   *to avoid*   *eating*   *greasy food.*

     main verb   infinitive   infinitive   gerund

The sentence above illustrates the use of infinitives and gerunds, but do you know why it is grammatically correct to use "to avoid" and not "avoiding"? This handout will help you make the right choice.

Infinitives and gerunds are verb forms (neither of them can be a main verb), which can have several positions and functions in a sentence:

	Infinitive	**Gerund**
	to+VERB	VERB+-*ing*
	to do	doing
Functioning as a subject	**To speak** three languages is hard. – used in more formal registers	**Speaking** three languages is hard. – used in formal and informal registers.
To show purpose or reason	**To achieve** their goals, the officials hired a new manager. – used as a reduction of *in order to*	–
Following verbs[1]	The study intends **to expand** the research on the topic.	He discussed **going** to Washington, DC, with his colleague.
Following verbs with no change in meaning	It started **to rain**.	It started **raining**.
	+ begin, continue, prefer, propose	
Following verbs with a change in meaning	The participant stopped **to smoke**. Meaning: The participant stopped in order to smoke.	The participant stopped **smoking**. Meaning: The participant does not smoke any more.
	+ remember, forget, go on, quit, regret, remember, try[2]	
Following prepositions	–	Thank you for **letting** me know.

[1] Infinitives and gerunds follow certain verbs and phrases, and there is no rule or reason why, for example, a verb *attempt* is followed by an infinitive (*The paper attempts to address*), but not a gerund (**The paper attempts addressing*). This is simply a matter of memorization.

[2] See http://www.englisch-hilfen.de/en/grammar/gerund_infinitive_difference.htm to explore how these words differ in meaning when followed by an infinitive and gerund

Strategies

To check whether a certain word is followed by a gerund, infinitive, or any other grammatical constructions:
- check the word in a learner's dictionary (e.g. http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/)
- use a collocation dictionary (e.g. http://www.ozdic.com/)
- simply type the word in a search engine (e.g. Google) and examine the sentences that contain the word.

Practice

Identify whether an infinitive or gerund should be used in the sentences, underlining the correct forms. Explain your choice.

From *Lesson Reflection – Class on Cloud Types*

During the conclusion of the main lesson, students were asked **to identify/identifying** the cloud-type depicted in a fourth projection and **to explain/explaining** why they reached their particular conclusion. This would achieve learning goal three by **to allow/allowing** students **to apply/applying** what they learned about cloud types as evidence during a formal assessment. Students were allowed **to use/using** the information recorded on their worksheets and resources around the room **to reach/reaching** a conclusion. Students one, two, and three reached the conclusion that a cumulus cloud was shown on the projector, which is correct. However, only student one listed a reason for her answer by **to write/writing** the word "puffy". So, despite **to list/listing** "cumulus" as their answer, most students failed **to identify/identifying** a reason for their response. From this evidence, I would conclude that students have learned how **to apply/applying** observations **to formulate/formulating** answers, but have not learned how **to explain/explaining** their answers through **use/using** evidence. Such limited explanations could also be due in part to a lack of emphasis on this task and a limited capacity to put thoughts into words.

Adapted from Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers. (2009). Ann Arbor, MI: The Regents of the University of Michigan.

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