

Phrasal Verbs

Overview

A phrasal verb is a verb that is made up of two or three words. The first word is a verb, and the second word is a particle (either an adverb or a preposition such as **in**, **up**, or **on**). Examples of common phrasal verbs include **get up**, **turn off**, and **deal with**. There are also some phrasal verbs which have two particles, for example **catch up with** and **look forward to**. It is difficult to guess the meaning of a phrasal verb from the meaning of each of the two or three parts.

Example: Scientists **carried out** an experiment.

The meaning of the phrasal verb **to carry out** (= **to do** or **to conduct**) is not related to the normal meaning of **carry** or the common meaning of **out**.

If a verb still keeps its ordinary meaning, even though it is followed by several different prepositions, it is not a phrasal verb.

Example: We ran up the hill.

To **run up** is not a phrasal verb. You can use the verb **run** in the sense of **moving quickly on foot** with several other prepositions or adverbs including **away** and **across**, and the basic meaning of run does not change. However, **run down**, and **run around** can be both a regular verb and also phrasal verbs with their own special meanings.

- I ran away from the growling dog → **not a phrasal verb**
- You can't just run away from your responsibilities → **phrasal verb** = to avoid dealing with a problem
- I ran across the sports field → **not a phrasal verb**
- I ran across an old friend the other day → **phrasal verb** = to meet someone or find something by chance.

Phrasal Verbs and Formality

Phrasal verbs are commonly used in both spoken and written English. Sometimes a single word can be used instead of the phrasal verb, but often this single word sounds more formal or more technical than the phrasal verb.

Example: I got up at 7am = I rose at 7am.

Instead of the phrasal verb **get up** (leave your bed in the morning), you can use the single verb **rise**, which sounds more formal.

Phrasal Verbs which do not have an object

Some phrasal verbs do not have an object.

Example: James stood up and walked to the window.

To **stand up** means to *move from a sitting position to a standing position*.

Phrasal Verbs which must have an object

Some phrasal verbs must have an object, and the object can come either before or after the particle. These are usually called SEPARABLE phrasal verbs. For example, to **turn off** (make a machine, light etc. stop working) is a separable phrasal verb. You can either **turn** something **off**, or you can **turn off** something.

Example: I turned off the TV or I turned the TV off.

How do I know where to put the object?

If the object is a pronoun, e.g. it/them/him/her etc., the pronoun must come before the particle.

Example: *I turned **it** off.* ← **Correct**
*I turned off **it**.* ← **Incorrect**

If the object is a long phrase, the long phrase usually comes after the particle.

Example: *I turned off **the lights in the front room**.* ← **Correct**
I turned the light in the front room off. ← **Incorrect**

For a list of phrasal verbs, visit: <http://www.eslcafe.com/pv>

Source: Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003). Longman Pearson