

UniEnglish vocabulary: phrasal verbs

An introduction to phrasal verbs

What is a phrasal verb?

Phrasal verbs are verbs plus one or two 'particles'. The particles can be either prepositions and/or adverbs. Phrasal verbs are also sometimes known as multi-word verbs. They are an important part of both spoken and written English so it is important to know not only what they are, but also how to use them.

Here are two examples of phrasal verbs:

- The door was open, so the thieves were able to **get in** easily. ('Get in' has the meaning of 'enter').
- We don't **get on with** our neighbours very well. ('Get on with' has the meaning of 'have a good relationship with someone').

You can see that even though the verb **get** is the same the meaning is completely different when a different particle is added to the verb.

Literal and non-literal meanings

There are hundreds of phrasal verbs in English. Some of them have a literal meaning, which means that the meaning can be guessed from the words themselves. Some phrasal verbs have a non-literal meaning, which means it is much more difficult to guess the meaning, unless the context is very clear. An example is given below.

- He **looked up** and saw the plane overhead. (Here the meanings of the verb and 'up' have not changed – the meaning of the phrasal verb is literal).
- He **looked up** all the words he didn't know in his new dictionary. (Here the meaning has changed. 'Look up' means to seek information in a reference book).

Activity 1: Literal or non-literal? Look at the phrasal verbs in the sentences below. Decide if they are literal (L) or non-literal (NL).

1. He *ran out* of the building to catch the bus.
2. We've *run out* of bread. Shall I go to the shops?
3. She *looked through* the window to see if he was home.
4. She *put* her books *on* the desk.
5. The police are *looking into* who committed the crime.
6. She *put* the television *on* to watch the weather.
7. Would you mind *looking through* my work to check if it's correct?
8. I *looked into* his room but couldn't find him.
9. Can you *go over* the instructions again please?
10. The ball *went over* the wall into neighbour's garden.

Types of phrasal verb

Phrasal Verbs occur most frequently in spoken English as they are usually informal in style. Often when a more formal style is needed, for example when writing essays, the phrasal verb is replaced with the more formal form. Each phrasal verb has its own grammar and word order. However, there are four basic types of phrasal verb, which may help when you are trying to learn them.

Type 1: Some phrasal verbs are intransitive. This means that the verb does not take an object. It is possible to use these verbs in a sentence on their own, or you can add more information to the sentence in any way you like. You cannot separate the verb and its particle.

intransitive and inseparable	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The plane took off.• The plane took off at 4pm.• The plane took off without me on it.
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Type 2: Some phrasal verbs are transitive. This means that the verb does have an object. They are also separable, which means the verb and the particle can be separated.

transitive and separable	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• He didn't know what the word meant so he looked up the word in the dictionary.• He didn't know what the word meant so he looked the word up in the dictionary.• He didn't know what the word meant so he looked it up in the dictionary.
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Type 3: Some phrasal verbs are transitive and inseparable. This means that it is impossible to place another word between the verb and its particle.

transitive and inseparable	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I'm looking for Lee.• I'm looking for him.
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Type 4 phrasal verbs are also inseparable because they have two particles following the verb. These verbs are also normally written with someone and/or something after them to show that they can't be separated.

Example: I'm really **looking forward to** my holiday next year, as I haven't been away for ages.

The best way to learn phrasal verbs is like learning any other item of vocabulary, in context. It's important to try and learn all your vocabulary in context as this will help you remember it and use it.

Activity 2: What type of phrasal verb? Look at the sentences below and decide what kind of phrasal verb each sentence contains.

1. It's very dark in the room; can you put the light on please?
2. I always set my alarm clock to make sure I wake up on time.
3. Before he bought the apartment he looked round the area to check it was okay.
4. Their marriage broke up after ten years.
5. Before doing the exam you will need to fill the form in with your details.
6. Whilst I was cleaning my room I came across the photos I thought I had lost.
7. His uncle passed away last year after a long illness.
8. You need to check in at least two hours before your flight leaves.
9. I have tried to give smoking up so many times but never succeeded.
10. Kim has taken up painting as his new hobby.