

Grammar notes: phrasal verbs introduction

General information

Everybody complains about phrasal verbs. And with some justification, I suppose.

It doesn't help that in books they're referred to as 'phrasal verbs' and 'multi-word verbs' and 'prepositional verbs' and whatever other name may be fashionable or grammatically correct at a particular time.

You know what they are, and so do I. They're verbs followed by what is sometimes called a 'particle'. This 'particle' is either a preposition or an adverb, or possibly one of each. Most people think it's a preposition. Personally I don't think it matters whether or not you know it's a preposition or an adverb.

I can't speak for other English teachers, but I can only decide if the word is a preposition by seeing which type the verb is (see below). If I don't know immediately, then I don't expect people who are learning the language to know. It doesn't help you to remember the verb either.

So don't worry about prepositions and adverbs. Call them whatever you want. The most important thing is that you should understand as many phrasal verbs as possible and be able to use them. English people use them all the time.

Unfortunately there's no easy way of learning them. All I can do here is show the basic uses and types. For meanings or equivalent 'normal' verbs, you'll need to buy a good dictionary or a phrasal verb grammar book.

Uses of phrasal verbs

We use phrasal verbs in three ways:

to describe an action literally. For example:

- He **went out** of the room.
- The neighbours **have gone away** on holiday.
- Sit down** and have some tea.
- She **walked past** him without saying a word.

The majority of phrasal verbs are used in this way. All you need to know is what the two words mean when considered separately. You shouldn't really have any problems here. Or not many.

to intensify or emphasise an action. For example:

- You're not going out until you've **eaten up** your dinner.
- It's been **pouring down** with rain all day.
- Don't **fill it up** completely! I only want a little.
- He can **add up** easily but he can't subtract, multiply or divide.

This way of using phrasal verbs is less common. Sometimes the meaning is literal - the rain pours down - and sometimes it isn't - you eat up your dinner. Obviously rain pours down because of gravity. Eating up your dinner gives us the idea of finishing it completely.

The non-literal uses are a bit difficult to explain and understand. However, because verbs are used in this way to intensify or emphasise, the general meaning is the same if you just use the verb alone (eat your dinner, pour with rain, etc).

In other words, you'll have no problem understanding the verbs when you hear them.

as verbs with a special meaning. For example:

I'll **look after** the children if you want to go out.

I've applied for hundreds of jobs, but they always **turn me down**.

I had plans to go to university, but they **fell through**.

Her daughter was **run over** while playing in the street.

With these verbs, knowing what the individual parts mean doesn't help you to understand. You need to learn the meanings of each verb as a whole.

[Verb types](#)

There are four types of phrasal verbs. It might help you to know this, but equally it might not. If you find it confusing, don't worry too much. There are various ways of learning phrasal verbs, and knowing the specific type is not necessary.

However, knowing what type a verb is can be useful for two reasons. Firstly, it shows you the grammatical construction, and secondly, some verbs can be more than one type and change meaning accordingly.

The four types do not correspond to the uses I mentioned above. Each particular type can include verbs with literal and non-literal meanings.

[Type 1 verbs](#)

These verbs don't have an object.

Examples:

The plane **took off** two hours late.

He left his wife and children and **went away**.

There was a horrible smell in the fridge because the chicken had **gone off**.

All right, I don't know. I **give up**.

Because there's no object, you don't have to worry about where to put it!

The main difficulty is when a verb can be more than one type. For example, a plane can take off (no object), but a person can take off a coat (with object). This second example would not be a 'Type 1' verb.

Another problem is when a verb can have more than one meaning but remain the same type. A chicken can go off, for example, which means it's old and bad and can't be eaten. But a person can go off, too, which means the same as go away.

[Type 2 verbs](#)

These verbs have an object, and this object can go after the verb or between the two parts of the verb.

Examples:

I must **put up** those shelves this weekend.

I must **put** those shelves **up** this weekend.

I must **put** them **up** this weekend.

~~I must **put up** them this weekend.~~

He **turned off** the TV and went to bed.
He **turned** the TV **off** and went to bed.
He **turned** it **off** and went to bed.
He ~~**turned off**~~ it and went to bed.

The council wants to **knock down** lots of old buildings.
The council wants to **knock** lots of old buildings **down**.
The council wants to **knock** them **down**.
The council wants to ~~**knock down**~~ them.

When you don't use a pronoun, it doesn't really matter where you put the object. We generally put the object where it sounds better.

If the object is very long - it could include a relative clause, for example - it will probably sound better after the verb.

If you use a pronoun, you have to put it between the two words of the verb.

Type 3 verbs

These verbs have an object, but the object must go after the verb. It doesn't matter whether it's a pronoun or not.

Examples:

My sister **takes after** my mother.
My sister **takes after** her.
~~My sister **takes** my mother **after**.~~
~~My sister **takes** her **after**.~~

I'm **looking for** my credit card. Have you seen it?
I'm **looking for** it. Have you seen it?
~~I'm **looking** my credit card **for**.~~ Have you seen it?
~~I'm **looking** it **for**.~~ Have you seen it?

Type 4 verbs

These are the same as Type 3 verbs, but they have three words instead of two. The object must go after the verb.

Examples:

I'm **looking forward to** the holidays.
I'm **looking forward to** them.

Do you **get on with** your neighbours?
Do you **get on with** them?

Get on with your work!
Get on with it!

Recommendations

There are a number of ways of learning phrasal verbs:

you can learn different meanings according to the main verb, for instance **look up**, **look up to**, **look down**, **look down on**, **look into**, etc.

you can learn different meanings according to the preposition or adverb, for instance **let down**, **turn down**, **sit down**, **put down**, **write down**, etc.

you can learn different verbs used for a particular subject or situation, for instance telephoning: **put through**, **hold on**, **hang up**, **get through**, **cut off**, **speak up**, etc.

you can learn the different meanings for one particular verb:

the new job didn't **work out**
she's been **working out** in the gym all afternoon
I've **worked it out** and you owe me £75

Personally, I think trying to learn verbs from a list is boring and quite difficult. It's better to learn them for different situations, then there's more chance that you'll remember them.

Even easier is to treat them as you treat any other vocabulary you learn. Don't think of them as a special subject that has to be learnt. They're only words! If you find a useful phrasal verb, learn it like you would learn the word for 'table' or 'ashtray' or anything else.

But make sure you write down the structure. It's useless to note down that turn off means *apagar* in Spanish if you don't know how to use it. The absolute minimum you need to note down is **turn something off**, because then you'll know where the object goes.

Even better would be to note down a couple of sentences using the verb so that you have a context to remember it in.