

Phrasal verbs are combinations of ordinary verbs like *put, take, come, and go* and particles like *in, out, on, and off*. They are a very important part of everyday English. Most phrasal verbs are *not* informal, slang, or improper for educated speech or formal writing (although they do take space when word count matters). In fact, for many phrasal verbs, there is no alternative to the phrasal verb—there is no other way to say it.

Some phrasal verbs are easy to understand (for example *sit down* or *come in*). But most phrasal verbs are *idiomatic*, which means that there is no way to know what the verb and particle mean together by knowing what the verb and particle mean separately (for example *call off* or *run out*).

In addition, there are a number of different “rules” dictating the usage of phrasal verbs in sentences, but these rules are different for every phrasal verb. There is no rule that will help you to look at a phrasal verb and know how to use it. Here are *some* of these rules (just to give you a basic idea of the complexity of the issue).

1. Separable and nonseparable phrasal verbs:

Separable phrasal verbs can be separated by their object. When the object is a noun, it can usually be placed between the verb and the particle or after the particle. However, when the object is a pronoun, it must be placed between the verb and the particle. *Nonseparable* phrasal verbs cannot be separated by their object.

Examples:

I **took** my shoes **off**.
 I **took off** my shoes.
 I **took** them **off**.
~~I **took off** them.~~
 He **ran into** a tree.
~~He **ran** a tree **into**.~~

2. Three-word phrasal verbs:

Three-word phrasal verbs are composed of a verb and *two* particles.

Examples:

Do you **feel up to** playing tennis after dinner?
 I **look forward to** seeing you again.
 You have to **go along with** your mother’s decision.
 I’ve **put up with** these people long enough.
 She is nervous about the job interview and just wants to **get it over with**.

3. Separable phrasal verbs with long objects:

To avoid confusion, short objects can be placed between the verb and the particle or after the particle. Pronouns, such as *it, him, her*, **must** be placed between the verb and the particle. And long objects should be placed after the particle.

Examples:

She **put on** her dress.
 She **put** her dress **on**.
 She **put it on**.
~~She **put on it**.~~
 She **put on** the new dress with the red and yellow flowers that she bought last week.

4. Two-word phrasal verbs that require an additional particle when used with an object:

Some *two-word phrasal verbs* require the use of a second particle when the verb has an object. Sometimes, the second particle is only necessary when there are two objects.

Examples:

The criminal **broke out**.
~~The criminal **broke out** prison.~~
 The criminal **broke out of** prison.
 I **hooked up** my new CD player.
~~I **hooked up** my new CD player my stereo.~~
 I **hooked up** my new CD player **to** my stereo.

5. Phrasal verbs followed by the *-ing* form:

Some phrasal verbs must be followed by the *-ing* (gerund, as opposed to infinitive) form of the verb that follows them. Nouns, pronouns, prepositional phrases, and other adverbs and adverbial expressions can come between the phrasal verb and the gerund.

Examples: He **ended up** staying home.
 She **lies around** not going anything.
 The doctor **went around** the hospital visiting his patients.
 I **started out** at the bottom working in the mailroom.
 Bill **goes around** constantly looking for bargains.
 He **ended up** here asking for money.

6. Gerund phrasal verbs:

Like ordinary verbs, gerund phrasal verbs can be the subject of a sentence, the object of a sentence, or the object of a preposition. How and when phrasal verbs can be separated is unaffected by their use as gerunds.

Examples: **Narrowing down** the list will be difficult. (subject)
 We discussed **narrowing down** the list. (object)
 We talked about **narrowing down** the list. (object of a preposition)
Narrowing it down will be difficult.

7. Phrasal verbs with *get*:

Many phrasal verbs are based on the verb *get*, and it is important to understand that the meaning of *get* in these phrasal verbs is not the same as the nonphrasal form of *get*, meaning *receive*. Instead, *get* as a meaning similar to *become* or *change to*.

Examples: I **got up** at 6:00.
 I **got back** last night.
 She **got behind** in her studies.
 She wanted to buy the book but the bookstore hadn't **gotten it in** yet.

8. Phrasal verbs with the particle *down*:

The particle *down* is used in many phrasal verbs and has many meanings.

Examples: His friends **came down** from Canada. (move from a higher to a lower position)
 We've **narrowed** the list **down** to three choices. (decrease in size, intensity, quantity, or quality)
 The police **cracked down** on street crime. (something/someone is fought, defeated, or overpowered)
 The warehouse **burned down**. (something falls to the ground)
 The campaign is **winding down**. (a process or activity is ending or has ended)

9. Particles used without verbs:

The particles of many phrasal verbs, especially phrasal verbs that relate to physical movement, can be used alone with a form of *be*. This is particularly common in conversation when the verb has already been stated at least once and does not need to be repeated.

Examples: Have you **run out** of coffee? Yes, we're **out** of regular coffee.
 Did you **turn** the air conditioner **on**? No, it was on when I came in.

10. Pronunciation of two- and three- word phrasal verbs:

Phrasal verbs are sometimes accented on the verb and sometimes accented on the particle. Always accept the particle after the verb unless the phrasal verb is a nonseparable, transitive, two-word phrasal verb—then accent the verb.

Examples: stick **AROUND** (nonseparable, two-word, intransitive)
STAND for (nonseparable, two-word, transitive)
 lead **UP** to (nonseparable, three-word, transitive)
 do **OVER** (separable, two-word, transitive)
 put **UP** with (separable, three-word, transitive)