

# Phrasal verbs



I'm extremely **put out** by this. I'd like you to **look into** the problem and **call me back** this afternoon.

## Definition

A phrasal verb is a verb combined with one or two particles. A particle can be a preposition or an adverb. A phrasal verb is also sometimes called a multi-word verb.

We can only understand the meaning of a phrasal verb by looking at all the parts together:

We're **taking on** more technicians.

'Take on' means 'employ' but we cannot find this meaning by looking at 'take' and 'on' in a dictionary.

## Construction

	Two-word verbs	Three-word verbs
	Verb + particle	Verb + particle + particle
Intransitive	I <b>get up</b> early. Please <b>hold on</b> .	✗
Transitive	We <b>put off</b> the meeting. Don't <b>let me down</b> .	I'm <b>looking forward to</b> the weekend. I refuse to <b>put up with</b> his demands.

# Uses

Phrasal verbs are extremely common - they are an integral part of English vocabulary. It is important, therefore, to learn as many as possible in order to understand native speakers and to sound natural.

Uses	Examples
Conversation, including formal situations	<p>I <b>ran into</b> Jane last week - she <b>broke up</b> with her boyfriend last year but she can't <b>get over</b> him.</p> <p>[In a job interview] "Tell me about your previous job." "Well, I had to <b>deal with</b> some communication problems with overseas customers. I <b>tried out</b> a few temporary solutions but finally <b>set up</b> a completely new system."</p>
Informal writing	<p>[In an email] Hi Steve, Jill didn't <b>turn up</b> for work this morning so could you <b>fill in</b> for her at the meeting? That is, if Maria doesn't <b>call it off</b>. Also, Tom <b>turned down</b> the job in accounts so you might want to <b>go for</b> it. Regards, Bill</p>

## Note that

1. Standard verbs and expressions often sound too formal or unnatural. For example:

"Goodbye and thanks for **dropping by** today. My assistant will **see you out**."  
"Goodbye and thank you for coming here unexpectedly today. My assistant will accompany you to the door." ❌

2. Many phrasal verbs have an equivalent, more formal, verb with the same meaning. For example:

He **went on** talking. [continued]  
She **did up** her shoelaces. [fastened]

But be careful because very often there are subtle differences of meaning so a phrasal verb may be required. Also, some phrasal verbs do not have an exact

**equivalent or alternative:**

I **get up** at 7.00 every morning. ['arise' is archaic and no longer used.]  
 He didn't want to get married but he finally **gave in!** [reluctantly stopped arguing and/or agreed to do something.]

**3. Some phrasal verbs have more than one meaning. For example, 'get through':****Connect by phone**

I tried to call you yesterday but I couldn't **get through**.

**Make someone understand**

I can't **get through** to him just how important this is.

**Succeed in a test or competition**

England **got through** to the second round of the World Cup.

She **got through** her first two interviews and has another one next week.

**Finish something**

I **got through** all my work today.

We have a lot to **get through** at the next meeting.

**Use all of something**

We **get through** a lot of milk in my house.

We need more paper for the printer - we **got through** the box you bought yesterday.

**Deal with or survive something unpleasant or help someone to do this**

I don't know how we're going to **get through** this week with three people off sick.

He had problems when he lost his job and had a serious illness but his friends and family **got him through** it.

**4. There are several differences between British and American English. For example:**

I must **get round to/get around to** fixing the car before winter. [UK/US]

He **gets on/gets along** with all his colleagues. [UK/US]

I made a mistake with the invoices and had to **do them over**. [US only]

## Separating the verb and particles

Transitive verbs always have a **direct object**:

He **got away with** murder. [transitive]

The computer **broke down**. [intransitive]

Two-word transitive **phrasal** verbs can be separated:

I'm going to **bring this topic up** tomorrow. ✓

I'm going to **bring up this topic** tomorrow. ✓

And when the object is a personal pronoun, the pronoun *always* comes before the particle.

I'm going to **bring it up** tomorrow. ✓

I'm going to bring up **it** tomorrow. ✗

Some **phrasal** verbs can be both transitive and intransitive, in some cases with different meanings:

I **wake up** every morning at 6 o'clock. [intransitive - to become awake]

I **wake** the children **up** at 6 o'clock. ✓ [transitive - to rouse someone from sleep]

I **wake up** the children at 6 o'clock. ✓

I **wake** them **up** at 6 o'clock.

I **wake up** them at 6 o'clock. ✗

In a sentence with a transitive phrasal verb, if the object is very long, it is better to place it after the particle.

During the meeting, he **brought up** the management's reluctance to focus on internal communication problems. ✓

During the meeting, he brought the management's reluctance to focus on internal communication problems **up**. ✗

Three-word verbs cannot normally be separated:

We **look up to** our new boss more than the old one.

Except when there are two objects:

Don't **take your disappointment out on me** - it's not my fault!

## Prepositions

1. Do not confuse phrasal verbs with other verbs which *sometimes* require a preposition. For example:

I work as an assistant.

I work for a big company.

He apologised to his boss.

He apologised for his behaviour.

In these examples, the meanings of 'work' and 'apologise' are clear and do not change depending on the preposition. On the other hand, prepositions are an integral part of phrasal verbs:

She **took off** her shoes. [removed]

She **took up** yoga. [started to do]

2. Like other verbs, some phrasal verbs are followed by a preposition when adding information. For example:

We're **running out of** paper.

After the break, we'll **go on with** our discussion.

These prepositions are not part of the phrasal verb because we can also say:

We're **running out**.

After the break, we'll **go on**.

See also [prepositions](#) and [get](#).

## Examples



Can you **look after** the Burkbank file please? I have too much work.



They were so far away that I couldn't **make out** if they were men or women.



If you go to London, you can **get on** the sightseeing bus at Tower Bridge.



He **came down with** flu last week and he still can't **get up**.



He's going to **run out** of space on the blackboard.



Do you want to **think it over** before accepting the offer?



I'm **looking forward to** relaxing at the weekend.

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