Phrasal verbs

[*Grammar*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/grammar)*>*[*Verbs*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/verbs)*> Phrasal verbs and multi-word verbs*

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Multi-word verbs are verbs which consist of a verb and one or two particles or prepositions (e.g. *up, over, in, down*). There are three types of multi-word verbs: phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs and phrasal-prepositional verbs. Sometimes, the name ‘phrasal verb’ is used to refer to all three types.

**Phrasal verbs**

Phrasal verbs have two parts: a main verb and an adverb particle.

The most common adverb particles used to form phrasal verbs are *around*, *at, away, down, in, off*, *on, out, over, round, up*:

*bring in* *go around* *look up* *put away* *take off*

Meaning

Phrasal verbs often have meanings which we cannot easily guess from their individual parts. (The meanings are in brackets.)

*The book first****came out****in 1997.* (was published)

*The plane****took off****an hour late.* (flew into the air)

*The lecture****went on****till 6.30.* (continued)

*It’s difficult to****make out****what she’s saying.* (hear/understand)

For a complete list of the most common phrasal verbs, see the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs*.

Formality

Phrasal verbs are often, but not always, less formal than a single word with the same meaning.

**Compare**

| phrasal verb | more formal single word |
| --- | --- |
| *We need to****sort****the problem****out****.* | *We need to****solve****/****resolve****the problem.* |
| *The team only had an hour to****put****the stage****up****before the concert.* | *The team only had an hour to****erect****/****construct****the stage before the concert.* |

Phrasal verbs and objects

Many phrasal verbs take an object. In most cases, the particle may come before or after the object if the object is not a personal pronoun (*me, you, him, us*, etc.).

**Compare**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| (p = particle; o = object [underlined]) | |
| **particle before the object** | **particle after the object** |
| *She****brought***[P]***up***[O]*three kids all alone.* | *I****brought***[O]*my children*[P]***up****to be polite.* |
| *Do you want me to****take***[P]***off***[O]*my shoes?* | *Come in.****Take***[O]*your coat*[P]***off****.* |

If the object is a personal pronoun (*me, you, him, us*, etc.), we always put the pronoun before the particle:

*I’ve made some copies. Would you like me to****hand****them****out****?*

Not: ~~Would you like me to hand out them?~~

*Oh, I can’t****lift****you****up****any more. You’re too big now!*

Not: ~~I can’t lift up you any more~~.

We usually put longer objects (underlined) after the particle:

*Many couples do not want to****take on****the responsibility of bringing up a large family of three or four children.*

We can use some phrasal verbs without an object:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *break down* | *get back* | *move in/out* |
| *carry on* | *go off* | *run away* |
| *drop off* | *hang on* | *set off* |
| *eat out* | *join in* | *wake up* |

*The taxi****broke down****on the way to the airport and I thought I nearly missed my flight.*

*We’d better****set off****before the rush-hour traffic starts.*

*What time did you****wake up****this morning?*

A good learner’s dictionary will tell you if the phrasal verb needs an object or can be used without one.

**Prepositional verbs**

Prepositional verbs have two parts: a verb and a preposition which cannot be separated from each other:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *break into (a house*) | *get over (an illness*) | *listen to* |
| *cope with (a difficult situation*) | *get on* | *look after (a child*) |
| *deal with (a problem*) | *get off* | *look at* |
| *depend on* | *go into* | *look for* |
| *do without* | *lead to* | *look forward to* |

Prepositional verbs and objects

Prepositional verbs always have an object, which comes immediately after the preposition. The object (underlined) can be a noun phrase, a pronoun or the *-ing* form of a verb:

*Somebody****broke into****his car and stole his radio.*

*I don’t like this CD. I don’t want to****listen to****it any more.*

*Getting to the final****depends on****winning the semi-final!*

Some prepositional verbs take a direct object after the verb followed by the prepositional phrase.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *associate … with* | *remind … of* |
| *protect … from* | *rob … of* |
| *provide … with* | *thank … for* |

(do = direct object; po = object of preposition [both underlined])

*Hannah****reminds***[DO]*me****of***[PO]*a girlfriend of mine.*

*How can we****protect***[DO]*children****from***[PO]*dangerous material on the Internet?*

*I’d like to****thank***[DO]*everyone****for***[PO]*their kindness.*

**Prepositional verbs or phrasal verbs?**

Not all phrasal verbs need an object. Prepositional verbs (e.g. *listen to, depend on*) always have an object after the preposition:

*I’ve got a great new CD. Shall we****listen to****it?*

Not: ~~Shall we listen to?~~

With phrasal verbs the object can come before or after the particle if the object is not a pronoun. With prepositional verbs, the object is always immediately after the preposition.(Objects are underlined.)

**Compare**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Do you always****look up****every new word in a dictionary?*  *Do you always****look****every new word****up****in a dictionary?* | Phrasal verb: the object can come before or after the particle *up*. |
| *Could you****look after****my bag while I go and buy the tickets?* | Prepositional verb: the object is after the preposition.  Not: ~~Could you look my bag after~~ … |

**Phrasal-prepositional verbs**

Phrasal-prepositional verbs have three parts: a verb, a particle and a preposition. The particle and the preposition cannot be separated. Many of these verbs are often used in informal contexts, and their meaning is difficult to guess from their individual parts.

Verb + particle + preposition

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *catch up with* | *get on with* | *look out for* |
| *come up against* | *listen out for* | *look up to* |
| *do away with* | *look down on* | *put up with* |
| *face up to* | *look forward to* | *watch out for* |
| *get away with* | *look in on* |  |

*Ken’s just chatting to a friend. He’ll****catch up with****us in a minute.* (reach, join)

*Do you****get on with****your neighbours?* (have a good relationship with)

*We****look forward to****meeting you on the 22nd.* (anticipate with pleasure)

**See also:**

* [*Look forward to*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/look-forward-to)

Phrasal-prepositional verbs and objects

The object (underlined below) always comes immediately after the preposition, and not in any other position:

*She was a wonderful teacher. We all****looked up to****her.* (respected)

Not: ~~We all looked her up to~~. or ~~We all looked up her to~~.

Some phrasal-prepositional verbs also take a direct object after the verb as well as an object of the preposition:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *fix … up with* | *put … down to* | *put … up to* |
| *let … in on* | *take … out on* |  |

(do = direct object; po = object of preposition [both underlined])

*She****fixed***[DO]*us****up******with***[PO]*a violin teacher. We’re really grateful to her.* (*fixed us up with* = arranged for us)

*We just****put*[DO]*the accident down to*[PO]*bad luck; there’s no other reason.*** (*put down to* = think the cause or reason is)