

Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs are multi-word verbs that, like single-word verbs, convey action of the body or mind (e.g., *speak up*, *figure out*) or occurrences (e.g., *turn up*).

Phrasal verbs consist of a basic verb + another word or words, usually a preposition or adverb.

Example: speak (basic verb) + up (preposition)

Some phrasal verbs require direct objects (someone or something).

Example: call (basic verb) + Lorenzo (direct object) + back (adverb)

These two or three words together form a short phrase—which is why these verbs are called “phrasal verbs.”

Phrasal verbs can often have different meanings from the basic verbs that they use. For example, *speak* merely means to talk. However, the phrasal verb *speak up* means to talk louder.

How are phrasal verbs different from prepositional phrases?

Be careful. While phrasal verbs can contain prepositions, these same prepositions can also be used in prepositional phrases. How do we tell the difference?

Examples: I looked up the directions.

Amy looked up the road.

In the first example, the preposition *up* is part of the phrasal verb *looked up*, a unit meaning “to locate information in reference materials.” The meaning of the sentence changes if the two words are not working together. In the second sentence, *up the road* is a prepositional phrase (the preposition *up* followed by *the road*, which is the object of the preposition). In this sentence, *looked up* is not functioning as a unit.

What is the difference between work out and work out?

There are also some phrasal verbs that look exactly alike but can have different meanings. Though they look the same, the phrasal verb *work out* can have a different meaning from *work out*. Take a look at these examples:

Examples: Our plan worked out.

The woman worked out at the gym.

In the first sentence, the phrasal verb functions to show that the plan was successful. In the second sentence, *worked out* signifies that the woman exercised at the gym. The context of each phrasal verb determines which meaning is used in the sentence.

There are many phrasal verbs in English, each with a different meaning. Rather than trying to memorize them all at once, study them as you find them in your everyday work. For reference, the table below lists several phrasal verbs, their meaning, and examples of their context within a sentence.

Phrasal Verb	Meaning	Example
ask <i>someone</i> out	invite on a date	Jesse <i>asked Andrea out</i> to dinner.
ask around	ask many people the same question	Walt <i>asked around</i> , but no one had seen his money.
break down	stop functioning (vehicle/motor)	Bill's truck <i>broke down</i> near the train tracks.
break down	get upset	Skyler <i>broke down</i> when her husband left the room.
fall apart	break into pieces	Holly's dress <i>fell apart</i> in the washing machine.
give in	reluctantly stop fighting or arguing	Mike did not want to go on a trip to Belize, but he eventually <i>gave in</i> .
go over	go visit	I have not seen Jesse in several weeks, so I will <i>go over</i> later today.
pay for <i>something</i>	be punished for doing something bad	Walt will <i>pay for being mean</i> to Jesse.

Activity

In the following pairs of sentences, determine which sentence contains a prepositional phrase (pp) and which contains a phrasal verb (pv).

- Joel stepped up his game.
Joel stepped up the ladder.
- We ran out the door.
We ran out of shampoo.
- Walt fell down the cliff.
Walt fell down this morning.

Answer Key for Activity

1. pv (*stepped up*, meaning “to increase or raise level of effort”)
pp
2. pp
pv (*ran out*, meaning “to exhaust the supply of”)
3. pp
pv (*fell down*, meaning “to drop suddenly or collapse”)

References

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