

Phrasal verbs

What is a phrasal verb?

We have already looked at prepositional verbs – verbs which need a preposition to introduce their object. Examples include **to apologise for** (“He apologised for his late arrival.”) and **to talk about** (“Today we are talking about verbs.”). Phrasal verbs include prepositional verbs, but also include combinations of a verb with an adverb.

Examples

to get up I get up at eight o'clock every day.
to look up You can look up the meanings of words in a dictionary.

Types of phrasal verb

Phrasal verbs can be either **transitive** or **intransitive**, i.e. verbs which **can** take an object, or verbs which **can't** take an object. In the examples above, **to look up** is transitive, taking the object “the meanings of words”, but **to get up** cannot take an object, and is therefore intransitive.

Transitive phrasal verbs are then divided into two groups, **separable** and **inseparable**, depending on the position of the object. An inseparable phrasal verb is a fixed unit, with the object following after the verb+adverb/preposition combination, e.g.

to do without We will have to do without the car for a week – it is in the garage.

In fact, almost all inseparable transitive phrasal verbs involve prepositions, either as a two word verb+preposition unit, like **do without**, or else as a three word verb+adverb+preposition group, e.g.

to run out of We have run out of paper for the photocopier.

As the name suggests, the object of a separable phrasal verb can come **between** the verb and the adverb. For example:

to take off He took off his coat.
 He took his coat off.
to put out It took six firemen to put out the fire.
 It took six firemen to put the fire out.

Important note

If you use a pronoun as the object of a separable phrasal verb, then it **must** be placed between the verb and the adverb. We can demonstrate this by expanding the two examples above.

to take off He was wearing a heavy coat, but when he came inside he took it off.
 ~~He was wearing a heavy coat, but when he came inside he took off it.~~
to put out The fire was very severe. It took six firemen to put it out.
 ~~The fire was very severe. It took six firemen to put out it.~~

Summary

	transitive	intransitive
separable	to bring up (children) to fill in (a form) to find out (information) to set off (an alarm) etc.	
inseparable	to get away with (a crime) to look into (a question) to deal with (a problem) to look forward to (a party) etc.	to break down to eat out to grow up to go away etc.

Exercise

Fill in the gaps using the verbs from the table.

1. My niece wants to be a ballet dancer when she grows up. Her parents are bringing her up to be ambitious.
2. Please fill in your name and address.
3. The police are looking into a series of burglaries in the area.
4. Unfortunately, the burglar will probably get away with it.
5. Tom was smoking inside the office and he set off the sprinkler system.
6. I think I need a new car. Mine broke down twice last week.
7. Perhaps the mechanic will be able to find out what's wrong, and deal with it.
8. If I can't get it fixed, I won't be able to go away during the Christmas break.
9. I'm looking forward to our company Christmas dinner in that expensive restaurant. I enjoy eating out.