

Studying and teaching phrasal verbs

A student's-eye view

Let's face facts: with the exception of those who are born with a 'good ear' and a finely-tuned memory or who just love the challenge of learning another language for its own sake, phrasal verbs can be one of the more irritating aspects of learning English for many students.

After all, phrasal verbs can:

- take a direct object (transitive) or not (intransitive)
- sometimes be *either* transitive *or* intransitive, according to meaning
- separate or stay together
- have a meaning that combines the original meanings of the individual words or a completely new meaning.
- have several different meanings, which may or may not behave differently

That's a lot of potential confusion, especially when studying phrasal verbs for the first time.

Example: *pick up*

Sales picked up. (= increased - intransitive, inseparable)

I picked up the pencil. (= lifted – transitive, separable > I picked the pencil up)

She picked up French very quickly (= learned, transitive, figurative)

Multiply these issues by the number of extremely common phrasal verbs the student may meet outside the carefully controlled input of the classroom, and it's not difficult to see why this is an area that some students never master. For many, perhaps the majority in any given class, phrasal verbs represent something of a minefield and a potential obstacle to becoming a natural user of English, long after they have mastered the other intricacies of English verbs.

If phrasal verbs are so complex, why use them?

Because of the issues outlined above, student motivation is key with phrasal verbs. Once students understand *what* they are, it's important to tell them about the *benefits* they can expect from using phrasal verbs correctly rather than relying entirely on single-word equivalents.

Explain that L1 speakers tend to use phrasal verbs in preference to Latin-based 'single word' verbs in informal writing and conversation. Phrasal verbs are a natural part of everyday English and a constantly evolving area of the language. Meanwhile, L1 speakers also unconsciously expect to *hear* phrasal verbs in relaxed situations, where more formal vocabulary can appear somewhat stiff or awkward.

Compare:

“Well, I spoke to Juan about the problem, but I couldn’t really **get my feelings across**.”

[Informal situation / informal tone, as expected]

“Well, I spoke to Juan about the problem, but I couldn’t really **communicate my feelings to him**.”

[Informal situation / formal vocabulary – not an error, but non-use of phrasal verbs may seem stiff/inappropriate]

The director concluded the meeting by communicating his positive feelings about the new agreement.

[Formal writing: formal tone, as expected]

Bonus: If you can use phrasal verbs well, L1 speakers will tend to relax and think your English is fabulous, even if you make a few mistakes with articles, verb forms and so on.

Use exercises like this one from *Grammar Explorer* Book 2 Unit 14 to work on informal tone with phrasal verbs:

REAL ENGLISH

Phrasal verbs are more common in informal speaking and writing. The single word verb is sometimes used in a more formal situation.

Formal: You must **submit** your essays no later than 5 p.m. on Friday.
Informal: Hey Jon, when do we have to **hand in** our essays?

- 9 Complete each sentence with the phrasal verb from the box that has the most similar meaning to the bold verb. Use each phrasal verb only once.

hand in talk about talk over think over turn down

- Anyone interested in the job may **submit** an application.
I need to _____ **hand in** _____ my application by tomorrow. I should get busy!
- Please **consider** the job offer. We could use talented people like you.
Hey, Tammy. Did you _____ the job offer? What did you decide?
- Mr. Clark, Tamara may **refuse** the offer. Other companies have offered her more money.
What’s your decision, Tammy? Are you going to _____ the job offer?

Meanwhile, it is always good to encourage flexibility of expression: an exercise that forces students to separate the phrasal verb when possible, is found in *Grammar Explorer Book 3*, page 287:

8 WRITE & SPEAK.

- A** Look at the meanings of the phrasal verbs in exercise 7. Then complete the chart with an object for each phrasal verb. If the phrasal verb is separable, write the phrasal verb + object two ways.

give away	<i>give away money</i>	<i>give money away</i>
give back		
give up		
put away		
put on		
turn down		
turn into		
turn on		
turn up		

Also advise students that it is preferable not to separate a phrasal verb when the object consists of more than a few words.

- ✓ Sally **looked** the word **up** in her dictionary.
- ✓ Sally **looked up** the word in her dictionary.

- ✓ Sally **looked up** the meaning of the word she didn't know.
- ✗ Sally **looked** the meaning of the word she didn't know **up**.

Moving Forward

Monitor students for *non-use* of phrasal verbs in informal writing and speaking after they have been covered in class. Romance-language students in particular may find it hard to leave their comfort zone with single-word Latin-based verbs. Some gentle encouragement to work with the verbs in the relevant unit and or the list in the back of the book may be appropriate. If your students follow the advice above on tone and word order, they can build their confidence quickly, since the only 'grammar' mistakes they should make with phrasal verbs will be faulty word order with pronoun objects. In turn, this confidence will leave students freer to concentrate on the main challenge of phrasal verbs: i.e., the wealth of different combinations and meanings in common use.

Students can further control their error count with phrasal verbs by making and reviewing helpful notes on new phrasal verbs as they encounter them. By 'helpful' notes, I mean notes that include a pronoun object with transitive verbs.

Examples of helpful phrasal verb notes:

stand up: *rise from a sitting position* (meaning is sufficient for correct use of intransitive verbs)

stand someone up: *fail to arrive for a date, appointment etc* (pronoun demonstrates 'separable')

stand up to someone: *resist* (pronoun position demonstrates 'inseparable')

For brevity, students may prefer to use *s.o.* (*someone*) and *s.t.* (*something*) as in the lists of phrasal verbs in the *Grammar Explorer* appendices.

Simply imitating the word order in notes such as the ones above is a natural and direct route to the confident use of phrasal verbs. For the majority of students, this is a more enjoyable and more successful approach than attempting to process rules about transitivity and separability while speaking or writing.