Phrasal Verbs for English Language Learners

Phrasal verbs are two- or three-word verbs. Phrasal verbs are common in English, so common that even though they are somewhat informal, most are still acceptable in academic and business writing. One thing that makes phrasal verbs tricky is that you cannot add up their parts to arrive at their meaning. They can look like a verb + preposition (pull through), or a verb + adverb (call off), or even a verb + adverb + preposition (check up on), but we read them as a single unit of meaning. Pull through means to persist until unpleasant or difficult circumstances end—there is no actual pulling involved. Call off means to cancel an event. Check up on means to investigate someone’s activities or character.

The main verb of a phrasal verb grouping changes form (conjugates) like other verbs; the particle on the end does not change. See Verb Tenses and Verb Forms for more on the different ways verbs can change.

Phrasal verbs are regional; the United Kingdom or India, for instance, may use different variations than speakers in the United States. In the southern and in northeastern United States they use slightly different expressions than in the western United States. Northern California expressions may differ from Southern California expressions.

Particles & collocations
Dictionaries usually include entries for phrasal verbs. However, it is possible to make a close guess by looking at the context of the sentence and the verb’s particle (that little piece that looks like a preposition or adverb). The particles, too, have a range of meanings, but grouping new phrasal verbs according to their particles might help you remember them better. This is because when you group words this way you create schema—mental associations and connections—that relate the words to each other. More connections means you have more ways to access the information. Grouping phrasal verbs based on their particles is not science—they can cross over into one or another group depending on how you visualize or understand them. Still, the mere activity of analyzing and sorting them itself builds schema.

The other key to remembering and using phrasal verbs is to go one step further and practice collocations for each. Collocations are words commonly used together. For example, we can run out of coffee, run out of money, run out of time, or run out of patience. Collecting and practicing collocations also creates associations and connections.

Across
For phrasal verbs that use it, the particle across conveys the sense of finding (come across) or communicating (get across).

Example collocations for across
We come across something unexpectedly while doing or looking for something else. We get our ideas across to listeners or just get across to them after some difficulty communicating.

Away
Phrasal verbs using the particle away include pass away (die), work away (work without stopping), and put away (return something to a designated place); away carries a different sense for each. Here are some of them:
**Example collocations for away**
We can run away from home or run away from responsibility. We can put away the clean dishes or put away [eat] a large meal. We can wear away the toes of our socks. Whiny kids can wear away our patience. We teach our children to keep away from strangers and we keep alcohol away from our children.

**By**
Phrasal verbs using by include those with the sense of visiting (stop by, come by, drop by); loyalty or principles (live by, stand by, go by); and waiting (stand by).

**Example collocations for by**
We can ask someone to come by and see us; they stop by or drop by to visit. We stop by (but do not drop by) the store to buy milk. We live by the Golden Rule; we stand by our family members; we go by the rules when we drive on public roads. We stand by for the operator to pick up our call.

**Down**
Phrasal verbs using down as a particle include put down (set an object on a surface), back down (stop attacking or criticizing), and slow down (decrease speed). Some common senses of down include these:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>movement</th>
<th>put down, set down</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sitting or lying</td>
<td>sit down, lie down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reducing</td>
<td>keep down, bring down, slow down, narrow down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reducing to essentials</td>
<td>boil down, break down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>failure, defeat, collapse, attack</td>
<td>put down, turn down, break down, shut down, back down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eating, drinking</td>
<td>force down, put down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing on paper, creating a record</td>
<td>write down, put down, set down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>along</td>
<td>walk down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cleaning</td>
<td>wipe down, hose down, wash down</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example collocations for down**
We can put grocery bags down on the counter or put down the remote control. We can put our ideas down in a journal or put someone down in order to humiliate him. We can put down a large meal. We can put down an injured animal. We can slow down in traffic, slow down our speaking, or slow down completion of a task.

**In/Into**
Phrasal verbs using in or into include log in (enter credentials into a computer system), hand in (submit something), give in (stop opposing), and sink in (start to understand better). Common meanings of the particles in and into include these:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>arriving, starting, entering</th>
<th>come in, log in, let in, usher in, enter into</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>inserting</td>
<td>put in, turn in, hand in, ante in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collapsing, ending</td>
<td>give in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from the public</td>
<td>send in, call in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>understanding</td>
<td>factor in, sink in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>changing, becoming</td>
<td>change into, roll into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>persuading</td>
<td>talk into, force into, drag into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>including, mixing, encountering</td>
<td>let into, opt into, mix in/into, run into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at home or work</td>
<td>eat in, stay in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example collocations for in/into**
We can put a boat in at a harbor or put a coin in a slot. We can run into problems or run into an old friend. We can call in to a radio show or call in sick for work. We can send a sample in to a lab for analysis or send in our tax payment. Eventually the truth sinks in; in a crisis a sense of dread might start to sink in.
**Off**
Phrasal verbs using *off* include *call off* (cancel), *log off* (sign out of a computer system), and *hit off* (be in friendly agreement). The particle can convey some of these senses:

- leaving, going free: log off, send off
- decreasing, reducing, removing: wear off, rip off
- separating: drop off
- finishing, stopping, canceling: call off, put off
- preventing, protecting, rejecting: keep off, goof off
- success: pay off, show off, hit [it] off
- beginning: lead off

**Example collocations for off**
We can *hit it off* with a new friend or with an interviewer. We *call off* meetings, weddings, or events. A slot machine or a lawsuit can *pay off*. We can *put off* doing our homework, mowing the lawn, washing dishes, or going to the dentist. A dishonest person can *rip us off*; we can get *ripped off*.

**On**
Phrasal verbs using *on* include *put on* (dress oneself), *hold on* (wait), and *get on* (enter a public transport vehicle). Here are some meanings of *on*:

- wearing clothes: put on, throw on
- beginning, starting: log on, turn on, hang on, hold on
- arranging an event: put on
- continuing or developing: keep on, ramble on
- transportation: get on, hop on

**Example collocations for on**
We can *put on* some clothes or *put* a jacket *on*. We can *put on* a fundraiser, an exhibition, a movie or a play. We can *turn on* a TV, a light, or a washing machine. We can *hang on until* everyone’s ready or *hang on* for the next available operator. We can *keep on* studying and *keep on* trying. We can *hop on* a bus, train, bicycle, unicycle, scooter, golf cart, skateboard, or plane (but we *get in* a private car).

**Out**
Phrasal verbs that use *out* include *leave out* (exclude), *figure out* (solve), and *run out* (exhaust a supply of something). Here are some common meanings of the particle *out*:

- outside, leaving: keep out, log out, zone out
- excluding: opt out, rule out, miss out, leave out, get out
- solutions, searching, finding: figure out, find out, work out
- appearing, making public: stand out, come out, point out
- producing sounds, expressing: call out, freak out
- ending, disappearing: run out, wipe out, wear out
- extending, spreading, resisting: max out, zoom out, break out, wait out
- criticizing: call out, lash out

**Example collocations for out**
We can *leave someone out* of our plans or *leave something out* of a report. We can *work out* a solution for a math problem or *work* a disagreement *out* with a friend. A tsunami can *wipe out* a resort, or a long day at Disneyland can *wipe us out*. We can *max out* our credit cards, attention span, or patience. We can *call out for help* or *call someone out for* bad behavior.
Over
Phrasal verbs that use over include get over (overcome), win over (persuade or convince), and talk over (discuss in depth). Here are some common meanings of over:

- finishing get over, be over
- thought think over, talk over
- transfer, change win over, take over, carry over
- movement come over, pull over
- again do over, start over
- visiting come over, ask over

**Example collocations for over**
We can talk over a problem to discover a solution. One person can talk over the other in a conversation. We can get over a relationship breakup or an illness. We can take over the direction of a meeting, take over for an absent co-worker, or take over control of a bank account.

Through
Phrasal verbs that use through include some with the sense of communicating (get through); completion (think through, talk through); and examining (look through).

**Example collocations for through**
We can get an idea through to someone, or we can just get through to them. We can think an issue through or talk through a problem until we have examined all sides. We can look through a photo album, a catalog, or a list.

Up
Sometimes the particle up adds little that is meaningful, for example in screw up (err), look up (locate the meaning of a word in a dictionary or the location of a text) or speak up (speak aloud or publicly). But other phrasal verbs use up as a meaningful particle, including pick up (improving), show up (arrive), and give up (quit). Here are some common senses:

- movement pick up
- increasing, improving pick up, dress up
- completing, reaching a limit give up, let up, fed up, shut up, put up
- approaching keep up, show up
- not in bed wake up, get up
- preparing, starting, creating set up, put up, fix up, pick up

**Example collocations for up**
We can pick up the toys from the floor or groceries from the store. We can pick an extra rider up in our car. Business can pick up during a busy season. We can keep up doing good work, keep up with the flow of traffic, or keep up our grades. We can put up with noisy kids or put up a new light fixture.

For more on phrasal verbs check an ESL or English grammar guide or phrasalverbdemon.org, which was the source of much of the information in this tip sheet. Other guides may go into more detail about, for instance, separability and non-separability and whether a verb is transitive or intransitive.

Contributed by Rosemary McKeever