

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:

to another place	move away, pass away, run away, send away
hidden or safe	file away, put away, hide away, squirrel away
avoid, prevent, reject	stay away, keep away
disappear, remove, decrease, reduce	put away, melt away, wear away, chip away, take away
continuous activity	work away, play away, talk away
separating, stopping, canceling	drop away, call away

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:

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

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:

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

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:

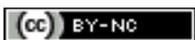
movement	pick up
increasing, improving	pick up, dress up
completing, reaching a limit	give up, let up, fed up, shut up, put up
approaching	keep up, show up
not in bed	wake up, get up
preparing, starting, creating	set up, put up, fix up, pick up

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.

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