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Tutoring and Testing at UHV.

Phrasal Verbs as Idioms

Phrasal verbs are compound verbs (more than one word) that result from combining a verb with an adverb or a preposition. The resulting compound verb is idiomatic (e.g. its meaning cannot be derived from the dictionary meaning of its parts). For instance, "take back" is a phrasal verb consisting of the verb "take" and the adverb "back." As a phrasal verb, its meaning becomes "to retract a statement," (I *take back* my comment on the discussion.), which cannot be derived solely by combining the dictionary meanings of the original verb and adverb.

Such phrasal verbs are the main way new verbs enter the English language. They usually begin in casual speech where they become part of our everyday vocabulary and eventually become recognized as acceptable standard usage.

But because their meanings are idiomatic, there is no logical pattern or formula for learning them. And to make matters worse, many phrasal verbs have more than one idiomatic meaning. For instance, "take back" can also mean to return merchandise for a refund. (John went to the mall to *take back* the sweater he bought).

The difficulty in learning phrasal verbs is two-fold, the unpredictability of their idiomatic meaning and the rules describing how they may be entered into the rest of the sentence. For the first difficulty, only two solutions exist—memorizing the phrases and immersing yourself in the English language.

TIP: A good strategy for memorizing phrasal verbs is to make flash cards of phrases that you come across. You can write the phrase on one side of the card and draw or cut out a picture that depicts the phrase on the back of the card. Flash cards are very useful and can prove to be very successful.

Always remember that there can be several different idiomatic meanings for just one phrasal verb.

For the second difficulty, there are several different solutions depending on the construction of the phrasal verb. First of all, it is important to know that phrasal verbs can either be **transitive** (the verb takes a direct object) or **intransitive** (the verb cannot take a direct object).

Transitive phrases are those that can take a **direct object**. Some transitive verbal phrases are **separable**. That is, the verb can be separated from the preposition by a



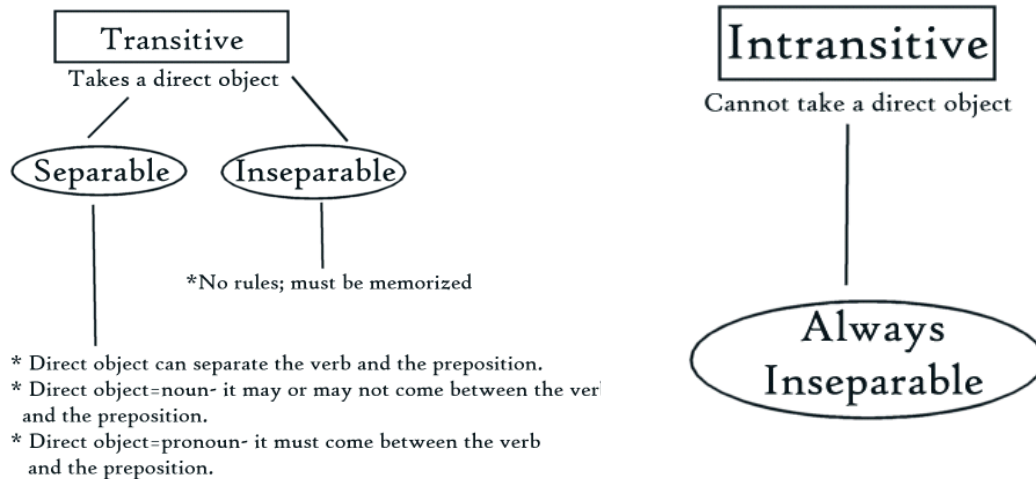
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direct object. If the direct object is a noun it **may** or **may not** come between the verb and the preposition; however, if the direct object is a pronoun, it **must** come between the verb and the preposition.

There are no rules for helping you to determine which **transitive** phrases are **inseparable**; you just have to memorize them. In these cases the verb and the preposition or adverb cannot be separated by the direct object.

Intransitive phrases are those that do not take a direct object and cannot be separated.



Transitive, Separable

** As stated earlier, in some transitive phrases the verb can be separated from the preposition or adverb so that a noun or pronoun (the direct object) can be inserted between them.

For Example: All three of these sentences are correct.

1. Can you **add up** the total in your head?

*In this sentence, you see that the phrase is not separated. The direct object comes after the phrase "add up".

2. She **added it up** in her head.

*In this sentence the phrase is separated by the direct object, *it*, which is a pronoun. Because the direct object is a pronoun, it must come between the verb and the preposition.

3. She **added** the total **up** in her head.



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*In this sentence you see that the phrase is separated by the direct object, *the total*, which is a noun. The direct object comes between the verb and the preposition.

The following chart is a brief list of **transitive, separable** phrases and several of their meanings. By no means is this a complete list. It is important to remember that there can be several idiomatic meanings for just one phrasal verb.

Verb	Meaning(s)
Calm down	to relax, to cause someone or some creature to be less active or upset
carry out	fulfill, complete, accomplish perform, to lift up and move someone or something out
hand down	pass something to someone on a lower level, to issue a ruling, pass something down through many generations
keep up	continue, keep the same pace, maintain a certain behavior
put on	dress in, deceive or fool
set up	arrange, to place someone or something in an upright position,
take down	remove from a high position, write from dictation, to write something down in something, to move someone or something to a lower position
think through	consider from beginning to end
wear out	Use until no longer usable, tire greatly

Transitive, Inseparable

**Remember that some prepositions cannot be separated because they are required by certain verbs for a specific meaning. If these words were to be separated, it would change the idiomatic meaning of the phrase.

For Example:

1. Although Jason has been very ill this year and has missed a lot of school, he does not want to **drop out of** school.

** For this sentence to keep its idiomatic meaning, *to quit school*, the phrase **cannot** be separated.



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The following chart is a brief list of **transitive, inseparable** phrases and several of their meanings. By no means is this a complete list.

Verb	Meaning(s)
back out of	To desert, fail to keep a promise, to move out of something backwards
come across	Find accidentally, to be perceived as a particular type of person by other people
drop out of	to resign from or cease being a member of something, to let someone or something fall out of out something
see to	arrange, supervise, to tend to or care for someone or something
stand up for	support, demand
take after	to behave in the same way as someone else, resemble
talk back to	answer impolitely
turn into	become, to change into someone or something
wait up	To slow down and pause for someone or something to catch up, to delay going to bed while waiting for someone or something
watch out for	be careful for, to keep looking for someone or something

Intransitive, Never Separable

** Some verb phrases are intransitive which means that they cannot take a direct object. These verbs can **never be separated** from the preposition.

For Example:

Correct:

1. Sean began to **catch on** after he read the directions several times. ("Directions" is the direct object of the verb- *read*, not the object of the verb "catch on.")
2. Sean began to **catch on** to the directions. ("Directions" is the object of the preposition to, it is not the direct object of the sentence.

The following chart is a brief list of **intransitive, inseparable** phrases and several of their meanings. By no means is this a complete list.



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Verb	Meaning
back down	retreat from a position in an argument, to go down something backwards
come through	succeed, to be approved, to produce or perform as promised for someone or a group, to survive something
drop in	to stop by for a casual or unexpected visit
fall behind	to lag behind schedule, to lag behind someone or something
pick on	to harass or bother someone or something usually unfairly
show off	boast by words or actions
watch out	to keep looking for someone or something, be careful

Caution: Mastering the use of phrasal verbs can be a difficult challenge and very overwhelming. A lot of time, dedication and motivation is required! A good method for learning how to use phrasal verbs correctly involves extensive listening and reading of the everyday English language that you are exposed to. And of course, it is always a good idea to carry a good dictionary, which can help in almost any difficult situation that arises.

Don't forget to visit the following websites for more information on phrasal verbs and practice with phrasal verbs. Also, be sure to check out the Academic Center's *Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs and Other Idiomatic Verbal Phrases* by Richard Spears.

Phrasal Verbs

<http://www.eslquest.com/phrasal%20verbs.htm>

<http://www.eslcafe.com/pv/>

<http://www.lsilver.net/phrasalvb.htm>

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