

MULTIPLE MEANING FEATURE OF PHRASAL VERBS

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Abstract: In this article you can read about multiple meaning feature of phrasal verbs.

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A phrasal verb is a verb that has two or sometimes three words. The first word is a verb and the second (and third) is an adverb or preposition. For example,

Take off

Many phrasal verbs unfortunately have more than one meaning, like a lot of verbs. For example,

Take off has several meanings, including:

remove clothing, e.g. Take off your jacket and sit down.

leave the ground, e.g. The plane took off on time.

subtract, e.g. They take off \$50 from the original price.

Native speakers obviously understand which meaning is being used according to the context. For learners that can be harder, even if you can often guess the correct meaning. For example, Take off your jacket is quite easy to understand.

The difficult thing about many phrasal verbs is that they often have a meaning that's quite different to the original meaning of the verb. For example,

Look up to = admir

Break down = stop working

Take after = be similar to a parent or relative

Transitive and intransitive phrasal verbs

Some phrasal verbs are intransitive, meaning they don't have an object. In this case you can use them like any other verb. For example,

Our car broke down three times last month.

Other phrasal verbs have objects, meaning they are transitive.

When a phrasal verb is transitive we can usually put the noun between the main verb and the adverb/preposition. For example, I can say:

Put on your shoes. OR Put your shoes on.

The meaning does not change. When I need to use a pronoun instead of a noun, I have to put the pronoun in the middle. For example,

Put them on. (Not Put on them.)

Here are some other examples:

Here's the form. You need to fill it in.

The clients can't come to the meeting so we'd better call it off.

Give me your coat and I'll hang it up.

What's the best way to learn phrasal verbs?

There are hundreds of phrasal verbs so you obviously can't learn them all together like a list of vocabulary. You need to consider them like any other verb that needs to be learnt. When you come across (find or meet) a new phrasal verb, pay particular attention to it. Try to understand the meaning from the context, then if you still don't understand, look it up in the dictionary. Try to use an English monolingual dictionary so you read the definition and synonyms in English.

At Wall Street English you learn phrasal verbs gradually throughout the course. And you learn them naturally through listening and speaking.

When and when not to use phrasal verbs

Native speakers use phrasal verbs a lot in speech and in informal writing. However, in formal writing, it's best to avoid phrasal verbs and use more formal, traditional verbs.

What are the most common phrasal verbs?

There are several phrasal verbs that you probably already know and that are used daily. Here are the most common ones with their meanings and an example:

Wake up – Stop sleeping – “I woke up late this morning.”

Get up – Leave a bed or chair – “He gets up at 6:45 a.m.”

Turn (switch) on – Give power to an electrical device – “Turn on the TV so we can watch the news.”

Turn (switch) off – Remove power from an electrical device – “Remember to turn the lights off when you leave.”

Turn up – Increase the volume or power – “Can you turn up the radio? I can't hear it.”

Turn down – Decrease the volume or power – “Please turn down that music. It's too loud.”

Put on – Put clothing on your body – “If you're going out, put a coat on.”

Take off – Remove clothing – “She'd just cleaned so she asked me to take my shoes off.”

Fill up – Make something full – “Let's fill up with petrol before we leave.”

Fill in – Complete with information – “I have to fill in this form to apply for a passport.”

Drop off – Leave someone or something – “My Dad drops me off in front of my school every day.”

Pick up – Collect someone – “My Mum picks me up after school.”

Log in – Enter a computer or website – “After you log in you can access the data.”

Log out – Exit a computer or website – “After your lesson, log out so your information remains private.”

Look forward to – Be happy and excited about a future event – “We’re really looking forward to our holiday.”

Look after – Take care of people or things – “Can you look after the kids while I do the shopping?”

Find out – Discover information – “She’s just found out that she got the job!”

Make up – Invent – “Is that really true or are you making it up?”

Put off – Postpone – “If everyone is sick we’d better put off the meeting.”

Phrasal verbs are an important part of English for you to study and become familiar with. But as you’ve seen, there are several phrasal verbs that you already know and use possibly without realizing it! Practice now by doing this short fun quiz.

Phrasal Verbs

Practice using some everyday phrasal verbs in this fun quiz.

Another challenging thing about phrasal verbs is that they often have more than one meaning. The phrasal verb pass out, for example, can mean to fall asleep, as mentioned above, but it can also mean to distribute, as in this sentence: The teacher hasn’t finished passing out the tests yet.

Phrasal verbs are multiword combinations of Verb + Adverb, Verb + Preposition, or Verb + Adverb AND Preposition that function like one-word verbs. They can be transitive or intransitive. One of the most important and challenging characteristics of phrasal verbs is that the meaning of the combination is often quite different from the meaning of the original verb by itself.

For example, the phrasal verb hang out, which means “to stay somewhere for a while without doing much,” has a completely different meaning from the verb hang. Likewise, the phrasal verb pass out, which means “to fall asleep or become unconscious,” has a very different meaning from the verb pass. Finally, the phrasal verb put up with, which means “to tolerate,” has little connection to the meaning of put. The sentences below illustrate these differences.

hang out vs. hang

The kids in the neighborhood hang out at the corner store.

He is going to hang the mirror on the wall.

pass out vs. pass

They both passed out in front of the TV.

Stand here and don’t let anyone pass.

put up with vs. put

At this school, we will not put up with bad behavior.

Put the car in the garage.

Multiple meanings

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The teacher hasn't finished passing out the tests yet.

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