

Phrasal Verbs and Prepositional Phrases

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Prepositions vs. Phrasal Verbs

Prepositional phrases and phrasal verbs are two of the most complicated grammar forms to master in English. Many verbs do not fit neatly into one category or another. The best way to learn about this topic is to study phrasal verbs. First, let's review some simple definitions.

How can you tell when it's a phrasal verb?

Usually, phrasal verbs don't make sense without an object. Many times the particle (the second part of the phrasal verb) cannot be moved.

For example:

1. She picked up.

She picked up what? She picked up **the pencil**.

2. He figured out.

He figured out what? He figured out **the problem**.

How can you tell when it's a prepositional phrase?

For prepositions, the sentence does not rely on the prepositional phrase to make sense. A good way to test if something is a preposition is to move the prepositional phrase to the front of the sentence. If it still makes sense, it is a preposition.

She walked.

She walked down the street. → Down the street she walked.

The sentence makes sense, so it's a preposition. "She" is still the subject, and it's still a complete sentence.

With phrasal verbs, you can't reverse the order. See this example:

She picked up the pencil. → The pencil she picked up .

The pencil is not the subject, and this is now a sentence fragment, so it doesn't make sense. Therefore, it is a phrasal verb.

Other differences:

Phrasal verbs can be separable or inseparable. In other words, the object can move around the sentence.

- We asked **him** over for dinner.
"Asked over" is separable. The object comes between the verb and the particle.

- I **got on the bus** at 8.
“Got on” is inseparable. The object comes after the phrasal verb.

There are two-part phrasal verbs and three-part phrasal verbs.

- She **picked up on** the office gossip

“Pick up on” means that you become aware of something

Usually, we cannot use two prepositions next to each other unless one or both of the prepositions are part of a phrasal verb.

- ~~I walked above over the bridge.~~

This doesn't work. You need to choose just one preposition per prepositional phrase.

- ~~I run down around the street.~~

This is confusing because we're not using phrasal verbs here. Just say “I run down and around the street” or “I run down the street” or “I run around the street.”

- We walked around under the bridge

“Walk around” is a phrasal verb that means to wander, so it works here. It's similar to saying “We wandered under the bridge.”

Practice Exercise 1:

What is the difference in meaning in each sentence?

Which sentence is using a phrasal verb? Which sentence is using a preposition?

1. I came up the ladder.

I came up with a solution.

2. I hang up the phone.

The picture hangs in the hallway.

3. The caterpillar turned into a butterfly.

The taxi turned into the parking garage.

4. She looked over her shoulder.

She looked over the writing assignment.

5. He broke up with his girlfriend of three years.

He broke the vase with a baseball bat.

Exercise 2: In these examples below, there are too many prepositions: Rewrite the sentence so that it makes the most sense.

1. I ran down through the tunnel.
2. I woke up in at 8AM.
3. She lives next to across from the barber shop.

Exceptions: When talking about time, sometimes we combine prepositions.

We'll be arriving **in about** five minutes.

Here, "about" signifies "approximately."

He'll be here **in under** five minutes.

"Under" means "less than" in this sentence. This form is used mostly in spoken English, but is not entirely correct to use in formal or written English.

Answers to Exercise 1:

1. I came up the ladder.

“Up” is a preposition in this sentence. The sentence still makes sense if we just say “I came” or “I came up.”

I came up with a solution.

“up with” is part of the phrasal verb. We cannot say “I came up with” by itself.

2. I hang up the phone.

“Up” is a particle, or part of the phrasal verb. “I hang up” does not make sense without the object.

The picture hangs in the hallway.

“In” is a preposition. It describes where the picture hangs. We could reverse the order of the sentence and still have the same subject: “In the hallway the picture hangs.”

3. The caterpillar turned into a butterfly.

“Turn into” is a phrasal verb that means “to change.”

“The caterpillar turned” does not make sense by itself.

The taxi turned into the parking garage.

In this case, “into” is a preposition that indicates where the taxi turned. If we reverse the sentence order, the subject stays the same: “Into the parking garage the taxi turned.”

If we say “The taxi turned,” the sentence still makes sense.

4. She looked over her shoulder.

Here, “look” is a standalone verb. “Over her shoulder” is the prepositional phrase.

She looked over the writing assignment.

Here, “looked over” is a phrasal verb that means to review or peruse. “She looked over” does not work as a complete sentence. She looked over what?

5. He broke up with his girlfriend of three years.

“Break up with” is a phrasal verb that means to end a relationship. “He broke up” does not work as a complete sentence. He broke up with whom?

He broke the vase with a baseball bat.

Here “break” and “with” are not a phrasal verb. “With a baseball bat” is a prepositional phrase that tells us what the person used to break the vase. “He broke the vase” works as a standalone sentence, so we know that it’s not a phrasal verb.

Answers to Exercise 2:

1. I ran ~~down~~ through the tunnel.
“Through the tunnel” makes more sense, but we could also say “down the tunnel” if it is a vertical motion.
2. I woke up ~~in~~ at 8AM.
“At” is used for talking about hours, so it is the only possible answer here.
3. She lives next to across from the barber shop.\
She lives next to the barber shop.
She lives across from the barber shop.
Both are correct here, although each sentence is indicating a different location for the barber shop.

Common Prepositions and their Corresponding Phrasal Verbs

About: talk about, think about, bring about

Away: give away, take away, turn away

Off: come off, take off, back off

For: fall for

On: take on, carry on, get on, hold on, keep on, put on, try on, turn on, leave on

Across: come across, get across

in: turn in, hand in, cash in, fill in, take in

out: turn out, cross out, cash out, fill out, take out, watch out, work out

against: turn against

beyond: go beyond

up: turn up, come up (with), fix up, keep up (with), set up, light up, look up, make up, pass up, pick up

along: go along with; come along

over: go over, turn over, ask over, do over

by: stand by

around: come around, fool around

with: end up with, follow through with, get through with, get together with

at:

into: talk into

down: calm down, close down, burn down, let down

behind: fall behind

off: call off, get off, drop off, put off, set off, take off

to: turn to, give to

See Further Resources on last page to consult full list of prepositions.

Comparing Phrasal Verbs with Formal Language

Informal (phrasal verb)	Academic or Formal (not a phrasal verb)
Ask (someone) over	Invite
Bring about	Develop; cause
Call off	Cancel
Carry on; keep on	Continue
Cheer (someone) up	Make happier
Clear up	Explain; clarify
Drop out (of)	Quit
Find out	Discover; confirm
Give back	Refund; return
Give up	Relinquish; surrender; stop; discontinue
Go back	return
Go over	Review; analyze; study
Help out; help (someone) out	Assist
Lay out	Arrange
Leave out	Omit; exclude
Let down; let (someone) down	Disappoint
Let go	used as a polite way to say “fired” or “laid off”
Let go of (someone/something)	release
Make up	Reconcile; account for; end a conflict
Put together; put (something) together	Synthesize; collaborate; collect
Run into	Encounter; meet accidentally
Set off; set (something) off	to anger or cause frustration; to cause an explosion
Set up	Prepare
Settle on	Decide; choose; select
Straighten up	Clean; organize
Take apart	Deconstruct
Take on	Start; agree to
Team up with	Coordinate; work together
Turn in; hand in	Submit
Turn up	Appeared

Note: verbs with “someone” or “something” are separable and usually require a pronoun or object.

For example: Let her down; help him out; put it together

Formal vs. Informal Language Exercises:

Decide if language is appropriate or not based on context (email, paper, phone call). Use the list above to help you. There might be more than one possible answer, but try to pick the one that makes the most sense.

1. To Whom it May Concern:

I would like to **call off** my subscription to the English Weekly newsletter. Could you please **give back** my money for this month's subscription?

Call off: _____

Give back: _____

2. Dear Mr. Williams,

I am emailing to **find out** whether or not you received the application that I **handed in**. There are a few things about my previous work history that I would like to **clear up**. I was **let go** from my last employer in March due to a budget cut, but I've since **taken on** several freelance projects. I had to **leave out** this information due to the word limit of the application.

Find out: _____

Hand in: _____

Clear up: _____

Let go: _____

Take on: _____

Leave out: _____

3. Sally: Guess who **appeared** at the coffee shop yesterday?

Matt: Who?

Sally: That girl who **quit** the nursing program. She said she wants to **return** when she has more money.

Matt: Really?

Sally: Yeah. Her mom got sick, and she had to **assist** around. She **continued** to miss classes, and she couldn't **reconcile** the lost work.

Matt: That's a shame.

Sally: I hope I **encounter** her again. She looks like she needs someone to **make her feel happier**.

Appear: _____

Quit: _____

Return: _____

Assist: _____

Continue: _____

Reconcile: _____

Encounter: _____

Make her feel happier: _____

4. Mandy,

I think we've **selected** a caterer for the event this Saturday. We will **coordinate** with On Time Catering Services. We will need to **prepare** the tables one hour before the event. Could you **purchase** some tablecloths? I am going to **arrange** some flowers as a centerpiece on each table. I'll be there around 10AM to clean the venue space.

Select: _____

Coordinate: _____

Prepare: _____

Purchase: _____

Arrange: _____

Clean: _____

5. Jo,

This relationship isn't **functioning**. I'm sorry to **disappoint** you. I feel like many things **caused** this decision. We can't **return** to the happier times we once had. You seem so sad, and nothing I do **makes you happier**. I **surrender**.

Function: _____

Disappoint: _____

Cause: _____

Return: _____

Make you happier: _____

Surrender: _____

Answers to informal vs. formal exercises

1. Call off: cancel
Give back: refund
2. Find out: confirm
Hand in: submit
Clear up: clarify
Let go: laid off
Take on: start, agree to
Leave out: omit
3. Appear: turn up
Quit: drop out
Return: go back
Assist: help out
Continue: keep on
Reconcile: make up
Encounter: run into
Make her feel happier: cheer her up
4. Select: settle on
Coordinate: team up with
Prepare: set up
Purchase: pick up
Arrange: lay out
Clean: straighten up
5. Function: work out
Disappoint: let down
Cause: bring about
Return: go back
Make you happier: cheer you up
Surrender: give up

Academic English Exercises:

Change the phrasal verbs to more formal verbs. Consult a dictionary or list of phrasal verbs to help you.

1. In recent years, the number of international students in American universities has **gone up** dramatically. Several studies **point out** that these students do not receive the language support they need. This has **set off** many faculty and staff members alike, who have been trying out several different models of ESL services. This paper will **go over** which models are most effective, and which ones **come up** most in TESOL research.
2. Environmental policymakers must **clear up** how their funding is **spread out**. Many organizations **cover up** the fact that most of their funds go to advertising campaigns. As much as two thirds of all funding goes to new marketing strategies rather than action plans. Before donors **settle on** an organization worthy of their contributions, they should **look up** all available information on budgeting before **signing up**.

Adding prepositional phrases to sentences: How many is too many?

She worked on the dock down by the sea along the coast of Maryland in the Eastern United States during the Civil War.

Usually, more than 3-4 prepositions is going to turn your sentence into a run-on sentence.

There are a few ways to fix this sentence. We want to focus on the most important information and prioritize. For example, it is more specific to say that she worked in Maryland than the Eastern United States. It's also better to say "coastal" than "by the sea" since they both imply the same thing, and "coastal" does not require a preposition.

During the Civil War, she worked on the docks in coastal Maryland.

Exercises: Look at the exercises below and see if there are ways to condense the sentence by using less prepositional phrases.

1. The health insurance system in the United States at this time over the next two years is undergoing serious changes.
2. She lives in a house made of brick in Upper Darby near the train station at the stop called Bywood.
3. Temple University is a diverse university in Philadelphia in the north with more than 30,000 students enrolled in various degree programs in graduate and undergraduate studies.
4. The prevalence of unemployed people in this town due to the fire in the warehouses of manufacturing has led to a rise in crime rates.

Answers to Academic English Exercises:

1. In recent years, the number of international students in American universities has **increased** dramatically. Several studies **demonstrate/emphasize/show** that these students do not receive the language support they need. This has **angered** many of faculty and staff members alike, who have been trying out several different models of ESL services. This paper will **review/analyze** which models are most effective, and which ones **appear/are mentioned** most in TESOL research.
2. Environmental policymakers must **clarify** how their funding is **distributed**. Many organizations **conceal/hide** the fact that most of their funds go to advertising campaigns. As much as two thirds of all funding goes to new marketing strategies rather than action plans. Before donors **select/choose** an organization worthy of their contributions, they should **review/find** all available information on budgeting before **registering/participating**.

Answers to prepositional phrases sentence exercise

1. Over the next two years, the U.S. health insurance system is undergoing serious changes. *“currently” and “over the next two years” can’t both be used here since one indicates at this moment, and another indicates the future.*
2. She lives in a brick house in Upper Darby next to the Bywood train stop. *“A train stop” implies that there is likely a train station nearby.*
3. Temple is a diverse university in northern Philadelphia with more than 30,000 students enrolled in various degree programs. *It might be better to say “various” programs here since the sentence could be misconstrued as 30,000 students in both graduate and undergraduate.*
4. The prevalence of unemployed people due to the fire in the manufacturing warehouses has led to a rise in the town’s crime rates. *By making “the town” possessive, we simplify the sentence and still imply that we are talking about unemployed people just inside the town.*

Location: In, on, at

In: usually refers to a space that is confined

- We stand in a room, in a building, or in an elevator.
- We sit in a car, in a backyard, in a park.
- She's waiting in the lobby; garage, parking lot, etc.

Time: months

- They went to the museum in February.

Locations: states, cities, and countries

- She lives in North Carolina.
- I'll be in Uganda over spring break.

On: usually refers to a surface

- I put the book on the table, on the shelf, on the chair, etc.
- She left her bicycle on the sidewalk, on the ice, on the driveway, etc.
- Please do not walk on the grass.

Time: days of the week

I studied on Saturday.

Transportation:

With the exception of riding **in** a car, we ride **on** busses, on trains, on planes, and on boats.

Location: streets

We're on the corner of 5th and Washington.

She lives on Girard Avenue.

At: usually refers to a location (restaurant, beach, movie theater, etc.)

They had plans to meet at the diner for breakfast.

We're staying at his house.

Time: hours

Let's meet at 6 o'clock.

Sometimes, you can use these prepositions interchangeably. Here are some examples:

- We stand on/in the street.
- We met at/in the park. (usually, you meet “at” a place).

Other confusing examples:

- Would you like to come in?
Someone is standing in front of your house
- Would you like to come over?
You are inviting the person to your house, but they are not physically standing in front of the house

- She’s standing in the water
Water has depth, so we use “in”
- She’s standing on the ice
Ice is a surface, so we use “on”

- She departed from Los Angeles and arrived at the Melbourne airport.
This example references a specific place, so we use “at.” Although an airport is confined, we would not use “in.”
- She departed from Los Angeles and arrived in Melbourne.
This example references a big place, so we use “in.”

In, on, at Exercises:

1. We met ___ the Laundromat.
2. She sat ___ the taxi for twenty minutes.
3. Put the water ___ the bathtub.
4. First we stayed ___ Oakland, then we went to my parent’s house ___ Mission Street.
5. The plane will arrive ___ Terminal B.
6. Would you like to come _____? It’s raining a lot outside.

Answers to in, on, at exercises:

1. We met at the Laundromat.

This is a tricky sentence. Pay close attention to the article “the,” which means that we’re referencing a specific place. “At” is usually used for specific locations.

“In the Laundromat” is also an acceptable choice.

2. She sat in the taxi for twenty minutes.

“In” is the only option here since a taxi is a type of vehicle, and we typically sit in cars, trucks, or taxis. “On the taxi” implies that she is sitting on the roof or hood of the vehicle.

3. Put the water in the bathtub.

A bathtub is a confined space, so we use “in,” not “on.”

4. First we stayed in Oakland, then we went to my parent’s house on Mission Street.

“In” is used for cities, states, and countries. “On” is usually used to talk about streets.

5. The plane will arrive at Terminal B.

We’re talking about a specific terminal, so we use “at.”

6. Would you like to come in? It’s raining a lot outside.

“In” is appropriate here because the person is already outside the house.

Completing Prepositional Phrases:

Now, you must fill in the correct preposition:

The desk is made ___ mahogany and comes ____ gold handles.

We cannot refund your money, but we can refer you ___ the customer service desk ___ the second floor.

Reversing order of sentences

Common Preposition Patterns:

1. The (noun) of (noun):

- The fragility of glass
- The nature of politics
- The objectification of poverty
- The happiness of the general public

Find the mistakes below. Note: Not all sentences have mistakes!

The stability Syria's government is still in question.

The customers' privacy is protected and guaranteed.

We need to focus more on the adaptability program to unique users.

During the Great Depression, millions of people faced unemployment, hunger, and despair that would affect the social structure the nation for many years to come.

2. "by" and "as"

"By" is the method in which something is done. It is used frequently with the "-ing" form of verbs. When used with nouns, it usually means "via" and typically answers the question "how did you get here?" I got here by bike.

- We give the coffee its rich taste by roasting it.
- We reinforce correct responses by repeating them.
- Most city dwellers get to work by taking public transit.
- I get to work by bus.
- I get good grades by studying.

“As” refers to the role something plays and can be used with many different verbs.

Popular forms: use as; come as; come off as (appears to be)

- It’s a blender, but you can also use it **as** a food processor.
- Or: The blender can also be **used as** a food processor.
- The blender also functions **as** a food processor.
- He dressed up **as** a ninja for Halloween.
- The pillows, bed sheets, and blankets **come as** a set.
- He **comes off as** unfriendly at first, but he’s actually a nice person.

By vs. As Exercises: Use “by” or “as” to complete the sentence. For some sentences, you must change the form of the verb too (stand to standing, for example).

1. The only way to get rid of the bacteria is _____ the water. (boil)
2. The iPad was not originally designed to _____ a phone. (function)
3. The governor is trying to reduce local traffic _____ lanes on the highway.
(increase)
4. _____ the park, the developers made it clear that they did not care about the protests from the local community. (destroy)
5. She offended the consulate _____ him ___ the councilman. (address)
6. She prepared for the costume party _____ a witch (dress up).
7. The senator _____ the stranger ___ his personal advisor. (announce)
8. The organization can’t _____ a non-profit unless we increase the budget _____.
(survive; fundraise)
9. We won’t be coming ___ train due to the scheduled delays.

Answers to “by” and “as” exercise

1. The only way to get rid of the bacteria is **by boiling** the water.
2. The iPad was not originally designed to **function as** a phone.
3. The governor is trying to reduce local traffic **by increasing** lanes on the highway.
4. **By destroying** the park, the developers made it clear that they did not care about the protests from the local community.
5. She offended the consulate by **addressing him** as the **councilman**.
6. She prepared for the costume party **by dressing up as** a witch.
7. The senator **announced** the stranger **as** his personal advisor. (announce)
8. The organization can't **survive as** a non-profit unless we increase the budget **by fundraising**.
9. We won't be coming **by** train due to the scheduled delays.

Further Resources:

Complete List of Prepositions

<http://www.englishpage.com/prepositions/prepositions.html>

Sentence Combining with Prepositional Phrases (About.com)

<http://grammar.about.com/od/sentencecombining/a/SBprepphrases.htm>

Prepositional Phrases Arrangement (About.com)

<http://grammar.about.com/od/basicssentencegrammar/a/preppharrange.htm>