Phrasal verbs are combinations of ordinary verbs like put, take, come, and go and particles like in, out, on, and off. They are a very important part of everyday English. Most phrasal verbs are not informal, slang, or improper for educated speech or formal writing (although they do take space when word count matters). In fact, for many phrasal verbs, there is no alternative to the phrasal verb—there is no other way to say it.

Some phrasal verbs are easy to understand (for example sit down or come in). But most phrasal verbs are idiomatic, which means that there is no way to know what the verb and particle mean together by knowing what the verb and particle mean separately (for example call off or run out).

In addition, there are a number of different “rules” dictating the usage of phrasal verbs in sentences, but these rules are different for every phrasal verb. There is no rule that will help you to look at a phrasal verb and know how to use it. Here are some of these rules (just to give you a basic idea of the complexity of the issue).

1. **Separable and nonseparable phrasal verbs:**
   - **Separable phrasal verbs** can be separated by their object. When the object is a noun, it can usually be placed between the verb and the particle or after the particle. However, when the object is a pronoun, it must be placed between the verb and the particle. **Nonseparable** phrasal verbs cannot be separated by their object.

   Examples:  
   - I took my shoes off.  
   - I took off my shoes.  
   - I took them off.  
   - I took them off.  
   - He ran into a tree.  
   - He ran a tree into.

2. **Three-word phrasal verbs:**
   - **Three-word phrasal verbs** are composed of a verb and two particles.

   Examples:  
   - Do you feel up to playing tennis after dinner?  
   - I look forward to seeing you again.  
   - I’ve put up with these people long enough.  
   - She is nervous about the job interview and just wants to get it over with.

3. **Separable phrasal verbs with long objects:**
   - To avoid confusion, short objects can be placed between the verb and the particle or after the particle. **Pronouns**, such as it, him, her, must be placed between the verb and the particle. And long objects should be placed after the particle.

   Examples:  
   - She put on her dress.  
   - She put her dress on.  
   - She put it on.  
   - She put on it.  
   - She put on the new dress with the red and yellow flowers that she bought last week.

4. **Two-word phrasal verbs that require an additional particle when used with an object:**
   - Some two-word phrasal verbs require the use of a second particle when the verb has an object. Sometimes, the second particle is only necessary when there are two objects.

   Examples:  
   - The criminal broke out.  
   - The criminal broke out of prison.  
   - I hooked up my new CD player.  
   - I hooked up my new CD player to my stereo.  
   - I hooked up my new CD player to my stereo.

5. **Phrasal verbs followed by the –ing form:**
Some phrasal verbs must be followed by the –ing (gerund, as opposed to infinitive) form of the verb that follows them. Nouns, pronouns, prepositional phrases, and other adverbs and adverbial expressions can come between the phrasal verb and the gerund.

Examples:  
He ended up staying home.  
She lies around not going anything.  
The doctor went around the hospital visiting his patients.  
I started out at the bottom working in the mailroom.  
Bill goes around constantly looking for bargains.  
He ended up here asking for money.

6. **Gerund phrasal verbs:**  
Like ordinary verbs, gerund phrasal verbs can be the subject of a sentence, the object of a sentence, or the object of a preposition. How and when phrasal verbs can be separated is unaffected by their use as gerunds.

Examples: 
Narrowing down the list will be difficult. (subject)  
We discussed narrowing down the list. (object)  
We talked about narrowing down the list. (object of a preposition)  
Narrowing it down will be difficult.

7. **Phrasal verbs with get:**  
Many phrasal verbs are based on the verb get, and it is important to understand that the meaning of get in these phrasal verbs is not the same as the nonphrasal form of get, meaning receive. Instead, get as a meaning similar to become or change to.

Examples:   
I got up at 6:00.  
I got back last night.  
She got behind in her studies.  
She wanted to buy the book but the bookstore hadn’t gotten it in yet.

8. **Phrasal verbs with the particle down:**  
The particle down is used in many phrasal verbs and has many meanings.

Examples: 
His friends came down from Canada. (move from a higher to a lower position)  
We’ve narrowed the list down to three choices. (decrease in size, intensity, quantity, or quality)  
The police cracked down on street crime. (something/someone is fought, defeated, or overpowered)  
The warehouse burned down. (something falls to the ground)  
The campaign is winding down. (a process or activity is ending or has ended)

9. **Particles used without verbs:**  
The particles of many phrasal verbs, especially phrasal verbs that relate to physical movement, can be used alone with a form of be. This is particularly common in conversation when the verb has already been stated at least once and does not need to be repeated.

Examples:   
Have you run out of coffee? Yes, we’re out of regular coffee.  
Did you turn the air conditioner on? No, it was on when I came in.

10. **Pronunciation of two- and three- word phrasal verbs:**  
Phrasal verbs are sometimes accented on the verb and sometimes accented on the particle. Always accept the particle after the verb unless the phrasal verb is a nonseparable, transitive, two-word phrasal verb—then accent the verb.

Examples:  
stick AROUND (nonseparable, two-word, intransitive)  
STAND for (nonseparable, two-word, transitive)  
lead UP to (nonseparable, three-word, transitive)  
do OVER (separable, two-word, transitive)  
put UP with (separable, three-word, transitive)

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This handout is based on “The Ultimate Phrasal Verb Book,” (1999), by Carl W. Hart, Barron’s Educational Series, Inc.