

# Dictionary of English Phrasal Verbs and their Idioms

Tom McArthur and Beryl Atkins

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# Introduction

## 1 The Problem

Phrasal verbs look simple enough. They are, usually, combinations of simple, monosyllabic verbs (put, take, get etc.) and members of a set of particles (on, up, out etc.). The combination is nowadays called phrasal because, on paper, it presents the appearance of a two-word phrase rather than a single item. Although it looks like a phrase, it functions in many respects like a single word, although under certain conditions other items (direct objects, adverbs) can come between verb and particle.

It is probably true that the children of English-speaking people learn phrasal verbs earlier than any other kind of verb, and that foreign learners seldom master them under current teaching conditions. The problem is four-fold:

- a A verb of this type may have a meaning which is simply the sum of its parts, but may also have a meaning which bears little apparent relation to those parts.
- b The particle may indicate some kind of direction but may just as easily have a meaning little related to direction.
- c The same particle can serve as a preposition or adverb and a student can easily confuse these functions.
- d There are so many phrasal verbs in modern English (and the number is constantly growing), they are so important in the spoken language, and they have so many shades of meaning that the student may despair of ever mastering this area of language. This situation has been aggravated by the lack of a good description of the phrasal verb, and by a shortage of useful teaching material.

This dictionary, with its companion workbook, is based on a systematic study of the phrasal verb undertaken by Tom McArthur for Collins in 1970, in connection with the preparation of the Collins bilingual dictionaries. It reflects the belief of the authors that these verbs are far more consistent in their behaviour and far more teachable than is generally supposed.

## 2 Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs are mainly colloquial. They are used casually, in everyday speech, or in order to express vivid, emotional and frequently slangy points, to conjure up special metaphorical relationships and jokes and to label actions in such everyday areas as cooking, gardening, maintaining the car, repairing things and shopping. Similarly, they occur widely in the technical languages of artisans and technicians, and are beginning to make inroads into sciences which have until recently depended upon Latin and Greek for their terminologies. Computer science, economics and statistics are cases in point. Being mainly Anglo-Saxon in origin, phrasal verbs still function as part of

the familiar, informal stream of English vocabulary. They are frequently used in preference to verbs of Classical origin which have similar meanings but unsuitable overtones of formality, pomposity or difficulty. You would expect someone to tell you that they climbed down (a ladder etc.) rather than descended; that they have learnt to put up with their mother-in-law rather than to tolerate her.

At least 6 types of verb can be phrasalised:

- a verbs of movement (usually monosyllabic and of Anglo-Saxon origin): **go, come, run, walk, hop, skip** etc.
- b verbs of invitation and ordering etc.: **invite, order, summon, let** etc.
- c the so-called 'empty verbs' or verbs of indefinite meaning: **get, put, take, make, do** etc
- d verbs formed with or without the suffix -en, from simple monosyllabic adjectives: **brighten, slacken, flatten, dry, cool** etc.
- e verbs formed unchanged from simple, usually monosyllabic nouns with such paraphrase patterns as:  
**chalk up** = mark up with chalk  
**brick up** = seal up with brick
- f a random scattering of two-syllable verbs of Latin origin, with which some kind of direction or emphasis is required: **contract** (out), **measure** (up), **level** (off) etc.

### 3 The Dictionary

This dictionary has been compiled to assist foreign learners of English who have reached at least an Intermediate level of competence in English. That is to say, they have mastered the basic sentence patterns of the language and have an active vocabulary of 3,000 words plus. The student will find this book most valuable when used in conjunction with its companion workbook in Collins 'Patterns of English' series - 'Using Phrasal Verbs'. However it is also suitable for use as a general reference book in the classroom and library.

The body of entries in the dictionary is based on a study of the previous relevant work in this field, supplemented by the results of discussion with both foreign and native speakers of English. Because of the many meanings and uses for such compositions as **put up** and **take down**, some commentators have argued that each sense should be treated as a distinct verb: that it is better to regard **put up**, for example, as a set of homonyms rather than as one varied item. The compilers of this dictionary do not adopt this view, but argue that differences of meaning occur within a continuum of meaning, beginning with the simple verb + particle and ranging through to the more opaque idioms. Such verbs are unique blends of syntax, semantics and idiom, and are dealt with here as so many themes and variations. No claims are made to exhaustiveness either in the number of the verbs covered or in the number of senses identified for any verb.

Since a large number of phrasal forms are simply the grammatical

operation of verbs of movement plus particles of direction, the dictionary lists such verbs as special entries, each marked with an asterisk, and followed by a gloss and one or more illustrative sentences, e.g.:

**\*move + particle** (*move, with direction*) 1 *vi* They bought a new house and moved in immediately. Our neighbours have begun to move out. The people moved aside to allow the procession past . . .

The gloss is not meant to be a 'definition' of the verb in the ordinary dictionary sense. The gloss for a particular entry is meant to be read together with the illustrative sentences to show the area of meaning occupied by the verb. Apart from the common words which are assumed to be known at this stage e.g. *move*, *take*, *put* etc., the gloss supplies, as far as possible, grammatical equivalents which can replace the phrasal verb in the sentence. Occasionally the equivalent is not a perfect match, because the verb may be unique in that sense. It should also be noted that in most instances when a phrasal verb such as **move up** is glossed by a more latinate verb *promote*, the latter does not possess the same features of informality, familiarity, and vividness as the phrasal verb.

Each entry provides the following information about the verb:

- a classification of the verb type
- an indication of the fields and/or style of language in which certain verbs may be used
- a gloss
- one or more illustrative sentences
- a reference to derived verbs, adjectives, nouns and idioms where relevant.

## A Classification

All verbs are initially classified as transitive (*vt*) or intransitive (*vi*); that is, as to whether they take a direct object or not.

Transitive verbs are next divided into separable verbs (*sep*) and fused verbs (*fus*).

### Separable Verbs

Verbs which are separable are those which, under certain conditions, may have an item inserted between the verb and particle. These conditions are as follows:

If the object of a separable phrasal verb is a noun, the particle may precede or follow the noun.

e.g. He picked the book up. OR He picked up the book.

If, however, the object is a pronoun, the particle must follow it:

e.g. He picked it up.

The vast majority of phrasal verbs are in this category.

### Fused Verbs

A fused verb is not normally separated by an item or items coming between the verb and the particle. The particle in a fused phrasal verb has in effect been 'stolen' from another phrase. The result is a



special idiom and the fused structure should be spoken and thought of as a unit.

e.g. The man came across//his friend.

contrast with

The man came//across the street.

Fused phrasal verbs are more difficult to isolate for inclusion in a dictionary than separable phrasal verbs. There appear to be varying degrees of 'fusedness' between certain verbs and certain particles. This is particularly true when an intransitive phrasal verb (such as **keep on** in the sense of *continue*) is followed by such a preposition as **at**. In some instances it makes more sense to treat these as phrasal verbs followed by an unattached preposition, while in other metaphorical instances it is best to take them as a fused whole. We have done this for the expression **keep on at** when it is taken to mean *nag*.

*Placing Adverbs with Phrasal Verbs* The rules for using adverbs with phrasal verbs relate to whether the phrasal verb is intransitive or transitive.

- a Intransitive rule: place the adverb either **BETWEEN** the verb and the particle, or **AFTER** the particle.

e.g. He ran away.

He ran happily away.

OR He ran away happily.

- b Transitive rule: place the adverb either **BEFORE** the verb, or **AFTER** the object or particle, whichever comes last.

e.g. She picked the letter up.

She eagerly picked the letter up.

OR She picked the letter up eagerly.

OR She picked up the letter eagerly.

## B Field and Style Labels

In the gloss of verbs whose use tends to be restricted there are indicators of these restrictions. For example, the entry **add up** 1 *vi* (a) (*Math: total*) shows that the verb can be used when talking about mathematics where it has the meaning *total*. Similarly **billow out** *vi* (a) (*Naut: swell or belly out*) shows that this verb is used in talking about nautical matters, i.e. sailing. *Math* or *Naut* are **Field Labels**.

Equally important are the indicators which show the style or tone of the language situation in which the verb is used. For example **buck up** 1 *vi* (a) (*Sl: be or become more cheerful*) makes clear that this verb is slang usage and therefore not suitable for use in writing an academic essay or for formal speech. The abbreviation *Sl* is therefore a **Style Label**.

A complete list of the Field and Style Labels used in the dictionary can be found in the list of abbreviations following this introduction

## 4 Acknowledgements

The list of verbs and the classification adopted here have also served

## Introduction

9

as the basis for entering phrasal verbs and their translation equivalents in the Collins bilingual dictionaries (English to French, German, Italian and Swahili).

Additionally, the material was developed for teaching purposes in the 1970-72 classes of English for foreigners conducted by the Department of Educational Studies, the University of Edinburgh. We would like to thank Dr John Lowe, head of that department, for his co-operation.

The typing of the fair copy was a remarkable achievement on the part of Alwyn Cooper.

It is customary to mention long-suffering spouses at this point. We should like to congratulate both an indoctrinated wife and a faintly sceptical husband for coming through 3,000 phrasal verbs almost unscathed.

## Abbreviations used in this book

The special labels used with the glosses are guides to how and in what situations a particular phrasal verb is used.

### a Field Labels

Arith	arithmetic
Aut	automobile, driving
Aviat	aviation
Biol	biology
Chem	chemistry
Cine	cinema
Comm	commerce
Elec	electricity, electronics
Fin	finance
Geol	geology
Ind	industry
Math	mathematics
Med	medicine
Met	meteorology, the weather
Mil	military
Mus	music
Naut	nautical matters, the sea, sailing
Parl	parliamentary usage
Phot	photography
Pol	politics
Tec	technology, crafts
Tel	telecommunications
TV	television
Stat	statistics
Theat	the theatre

**b Style Labels**

Euph	euphemistic
Fam	familiar, informal, very colloquial
Lit	literal, basic, physical, observable
Pej	pejorative, debasing, insulting
Sl	slang
Vulg	vulgar

**c Grammatical Terms**

adj	adjective
fus	fused, not separable (see Introduction p. 7)
imper	imperative
n	noun
neg	negative
n cpd	noun compound. For the purposes of this dictionary this is a combination of two nouns. e.g., <b>a cattle round-up, a getaway car, a takeover bid</b>
n phr	noun phrase. For the purpose of this dictionary this is a combination of adjective + noun, e.g., <b>a nervous breakdown, a medical check-up, a funny setup</b>
pass	passive
sep	separable, <i>may</i> be separated (see Introduction, p. 7)
vi	intransitive verb
vt	transitive verb

**d Other Abbreviations**

Brit	British usage
Dial	dialect usage
emph	emphatic
impers	impersonal
orig	originally
partic	particularly
Scot	Scottish usage
US	American usage
usu	usually

# Dictionary of English Phrasal Verbs and their Idioms

- abide by** *vt fus* (*keep to, adhere to*) I expect him to abide by his decision to help us. She will abide by her promise.
- act out** *vt sep* (*act in full, present in a theatrical way*) He acted out all that had happened to him. In group therapy, patients can act out their problems.
- act (up)on** *vt fus* (*do something definite about*) You should act upon this letter at once, or it will be too late.
- act up** *vi* (a) (*Fam: behave badly*) \*The children have been acting up all day, and I'm exhausted. (b) (*Fam: perform erratically*) My car has started acting up and badly needs servicing.
- add in** *vt sep* (*insert*) Would you add in these items, please, in order to complete the list?
- add on** *vt sep* (*add as an extra or extras*) Would you please add these names on (to your list)? Add the other items on at the bottom of the page.
- add together** *vt sep* (*intensive of add*) He added the numbers together.
- add up** 1 *vi* (a) (*Math: total*) These figures don't add up right. (b) (*Fig Fam: make sense*) It all adds up, I can see now why he left so suddenly. Nothing he does seems to add up. 2 *vt sep* (a) (*Lit: total*) They added up several columns of figures. (b) (*Fig: assess*) They added up all the advantages and disadvantages and tried to come to a decision.
- add up to** *vt fus* (a) (*Math: amount to*) The money he spent added up to more than £1,000. (b) (*Fig: signify, indicate*) The evidence all adds up to a case of murder.
- admit of** *vt fus* (*leave room for*) This work admits of no delay.
- agree with** *vt fus* (a) (*have same opinion as*) I can't agree with you in this matter. (b) (*coincide with*) His explanation agrees with the facts of the situation. (c) (*suit the health of*) The climate of

southern France agrees with me. Rich food doesn't agree with her. (d) (*Fam: approve of*) I don't agree with people drinking brandy all day long. (e) (*Gram: of verb, adjective etc.*) A verb always agrees with its subject.

**\*allow + particle** *vt sep* (*permit, with direction*) The doorman allowed the people in one by one. They allowed me out in order to make a telephone call. The doctor allows her up for two hours each day, because she has made such excellent progress.

**allow for** *vt fus* (*take account of, make concession for*) You should allow for his poor eyesight. The company will allow for extra expenditure next year. When making up this kind of material, you should allow for shrinkage (in the wash).

**allow of** = **admit of**.

**\*amble + particle** *vi* (*walk slowly and gently, with direction*) The cows ambled along, chewing gently. He ambled up to me and asked what time it was.

**answer back** 1 *vi* (*reply insolently*) Don't answer back like that! The little boy answered back cheekily to his father. 2 *vt sep* (*reply insolently to*) The little boy answered his father back several times.

**answer for** *vt fus* (a) (*be responsible for*) You must answer for any missing articles after the party. They have a lot to answer for and must have uneasy consciences. (b) (*guarantee*) I will answer for the truth of his statements. He can answer for his son's behaviour.

**answer to** *vt fus* (*correspond to, be in accord with*) A man answering to the police description was arrested in London last night.

**ante up** (*Fam: from poker*) 1 *vi* (a) (*Lit: make an initial stake*) They anted up and started to play. (b) (*Fig: contribute a sum of money*) The government anted up to the tune of 20 million pounds. 2 *vt fus* (a) (*Lit: stake, in order to start a game*) They each anted up ten dollars. (b) (*Fig: contribute*) The government anted up £20 million as its share in the project. (c) (*Fig: pay*) They finally anted up 400 dollars for the use of the premises.

**argue away** 1 *vi* (*argue continuously*) They sometimes argue away for hours. 2 *vt sep* (*dismiss with a plausible argument*) He tried to argue the matter away. You can't argue away this problem.

**argue down** *vt sep* (*silence through argument*) They argued him down fiercely.

**argue out** *vt sep* (*argue to a satisfactory result*) They intend to argue the whole problem out tomorrow night.

**\*ask + particle** (*invite, with direction*) We asked them in for

coffee. They asked us over for dinner. I'll never ask her out again, her tastes are too expensive!

**ask after** *vt fus* (*seek information about, in a sympathetic way*) They were asking after you, and I told them you were very well. She asked after the children.

**ask for** *vt fus* (a) (*request*) He asked for the money. (b) = **ask after**. (c) *Idioms*: (i) to ask for trouble = to invite trouble unnecessarily. (ii) He asked for it! = This is the trouble he invited! *Example*: She had been teasing the dog for weeks, and I'm not surprised it bit her—she certainly asked for it.

**\*assist + particle** (*help, with direction*) They assisted him in from the street and laid him on the bed. She assisted the old man out.

**attend (up)on** *vt fus* (*Old: serve*) The courtiers attended upon the king.

**auction off** *vt sep* (*sell by auction*) They auctioned off all the paintings last week.

**average out** 1 *vi* (*reach an average*) His taxes should average out at about one quarter of his income. 2 *vt sep* (*make or calculate the average of*) They averaged out the numbers and got the result 7.5.

**average out at** *vt fus* (*be averaged at*) Their working hours average out at 40 per week. His weekly earnings average out at £35.

**average up** *vt sep* (*raise to meet the average*) They averaged up the wages of the lower-paid workers.

**babble away** *vi* (*babble, chatter continuously*) The children sometimes babble away for hours. He babbled away about his problems.

**babble on** *vi* (*continue babbling, usu unpleasantly*) She babbled on about her problems. He was babbling on about his golf score.

**babble out** *vt sep* (*say or emit in a babble of words*) In his fear, he babbled out the names of his accomplices. She babbled out something I couldn't understand.

**back away** 1 *vi* (*retreat*) The frightened horse backed away from the snake. 2 *vt sep* (*reverse away*) He backed the lorry away, so that we could get into the garage.

**back down** *vi* (a) (*descend backwards*) He backed down carefully, while I held the ladder for him. The car at the top of the slope backed slowly down. (b) (*Fig Fam: give way, yield*) He backed down and accepted our proposals. The trade union expects the management to back down. They are too proud to back down and admit mistakes.

**back on to** *vt fus* (*be neighbour to, at the back*) The house backs on

to a market garden.

**back out** 1 *vi* (a) (*go out backwards*) The courtiers backed out (of the royal presence). He backed out when the dog came towards him. The truck backed out of the narrow lane. (b) (*Fig: withdraw*) He has decided to back out (of the scheme). I think they will back out when they see how much it will cost. 2 *vt sep* (*bring out backwards*) He backed the car out (of the garage).

**back up** 1 *vi* (*move up backwards*) The trucks backed up as far as possible to make room for the others. 2 *vt sep* (a) (*move up backwards*) They backed the trucks up as much as possible, to make room for the others. (b) (*Fig Fam: support*) I hope you will back me up in this argument. He always backs up his friends. Nobody backed her up when she protested against the decision. I'll back your story up, if they ask me about it.

**bail out** *vt sep* (a) (*Law: pay money as a surety for*) His brother bailed him out (of prison). He was bailed out. (b) (*Fig: help in an emergency*) I hope someone will bail me out of this.

**bale out** 1 *vi* (a) (*Aviat: leave by parachute*) The crew baled out (of the blazing plane). We shall have to bale out soon. (b) (*Sailing: expel incoming water*) They baled out desperately, to stop the boat sinking. 2 *vt sep* (*empty out*) You must bale out the water in the bottom of the boat or we will sink.

**ball up** *vt sep* (a) (*make round*) He balled up the clay in his hand. (b) (*Sl: spoil, ruin*) It was his fault that the scheme failed, he balled up the whole thing.

**band together** *vi* (*join together in a band or group*) They banded together to defend themselves.

**bandage up** *vt sep* (*bandage, bind as fully as possible*) She bandaged up the wound. In the hospital they bandaged up his arm.

**bandy about/around/round** *vt sep* (*Fam: pass about, spread around, usu in an unsatisfactory way*) I don't like my name being bandied about by all the gossips in town. The story is being bandied about that you are going to leave.

**\*bang + particle** 1 *vi* (*Fam: move with a banging noise, with direction*) The boys banged about upstairs. She banged off angrily to her room. The old car was banging along. 2 *vt sep* (*put or fix with banging noise, with direction*) He banged the book down on the table. She banged it back on the shelf and walked out angrily. He banged the box away and closed the drawer. He banged in the nail with a hammer.

**bang away** 1 *vi* (a) *see \*bang* (b) (*Fam: shoot continuously*) The soldiers were banging away at the target. 2 *vt sep* *see \*bang*.

**bang into** *vt fus* (a) (*collide with*) He banged into a bus on the high street. The car banged into a wall. (b) (*Fig Fam: meet by*

*chance*) I didn't expect to bang into him again. You never know who you're going to bang into in this place.

**bang out** 1 *vi* see **\*bang** 2 *vt sep* (a) see **\*bang** (b) (*produce noisily*) He banged out an article on the typewriter. She banged out a tune on the piano.

**bank up** *vt sep* (*support, usu with banks*) They are banking up the whole terrace, to prevent it collapsing. The sides of the canal have been banked up with concrete. He banked up the fire before he went to bed.

**bank (up)on** *vt fus* (*Fam: count on, depend on*) I'm banking on you to help us. Can we bank upon this promise? Don't bank upon any money from me.

**bar in** *vt sep* (*lock in with bars*) She barred herself in so no one could get at her.

**bar out** *vt sep* (*lock out or exclude with bars*) He barred the men out by bolting both doors and windows.

**bar up** *vt sep* (*block with bars*) The basement windows were barred up against burglars.

**bargain away** 1 *vi* (*bargain or haggle continuously*) The men in the bazaar often bargain away for hours. 2 *vt sep* (*lose through bargaining*) He bargained away the property. They have bargained away all hope of success.

**bargain for** *vt fus* (*Fam: expect*) I didn't bargain for what happened. This is not what I bargained for at all. When he challenged them, he didn't bargain for such a humiliating defeat.

**\*barg + particle** *vi* (*Fam: blunder or charge clumsily, with direction*) They barged off to find a pub. The boys barged about, making a lot of noise. I wish you would stop bargaining in without knocking.

**barge in** *vi* (a) see **\*barge** (b) (*Fig Fam: interrupt*) I hope you don't mind me barging in like this. He always barges in on other people's conversations.

**bark out** *vt sep* (*shout out in a sharp or barking voice*) The sergeant barked out his orders.

**barricade in** *vt sep* (*enclose with barriers*) They have barricaded the whole area in. The street was barricaded in. He has barricaded himself in with a shotgun and two hostages.

**bash about/around** *vt sep* (*Fam: beat physically*) He bashes his wife about. The child has been badly bashed about.

**bash in** *vt sep* (a) (*dent, usu severely*) The top of the box has been bashed in. (b) (*Fam: batter, beat in*) The gang bashed in his head



**bash up** *vt sep (smash badly)* He has bashed up his car. The gang bashed up his face. They said they would bash me up if I went to the police.

**batter about/around**=**bash about**.

**batter down** *vt sep (knock down with heavy blows)* The men have battered down the door.

**batter in** *vt sep (knock in by battering)* The men have battered in the door. The murderer battered in his victim's head.

**battle on** *vi (fight on, continue to do battle)* (a) (Lit) The army must battle on. (b) (Fig) We must battle on against all opposition. The ship battled on against the gale.

**bawl out** 1 *vi (shout out loudly and raucously)* The steer bawled out in pain. 2 *vt sep (a) (shout out loudly and raucously)* The man bawled out his commands. He bawled out the news. (b) (Fig Fam: reprimand) The colonel bawled us all out for inefficiency. *Idiom*:— a bawling-out=a severe reprimand.

**\*be + particle** *vi (be, with location)* Oh, if you're looking for her, she's about somewhere. If you want to see him, he's always in at six p.m. They are up in the attic, looking at some old pictures. He's down in the cellar, getting some coal. She's away in London at the moment. I'm afraid he's out, and won't be back till about midnight

**be about** *vi (a) see \*be (b) (tense use + infinitive=be going to do in the near future)* He is about to go to work. She was about to phone you when you came in. (c) (be doing) What is he about now? I wish I knew just what they were about

**be above** *vi (a) see \*be (b) (Fig: be superior to)* He is above such petty things. She thinks she is above criticism. He is not above stealing to get what he wants.

**be after** *vt fus (want, seek)* He is after promotion. I think she's after him, and not his friend. What are they after?

**be along** *vi (a) see \*be (b) (Fam: appear, arrive)* He'll be along in a moment. Please have a seat, someone will be along soon.

**be at** *vt fus (a) (Fig Fam: nag)* She's at him all the time about his behaviour. (b) (Fig Fam: be occupied with, be doing) He's at it again. They're hard at it, trying to get finished before nightfall. She's at this job day and night. (c) (US Sl: be happening) This is where it's at, man.

**be away** *vi (a) see \*be (b) (exclamation on departure of vehicle or aeroplane etc)* It's away! They're away! (c) *Idiom*: to be away with the fairies=to be slightly mad, to be rather eccentric. (d) (Fig: be detached or transported mentally) She's away in a world of her own. He's away somewhere.