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Phrasal verbs

A phrasal verb is a verb plus a small word (up, out, off, on, in) that together have a new meaning, such as give up or look after. They are very common in natural speech, so use them in IELTS Speaking, but prefer single formal verbs, such as postpone or investigate, in Writing.

What to know

What is a phrasal verb?

A phrasal verb combines a verb with one or two small words called particles. The meaning is often different from the parts: **give up** means stop, not give something upwards. **Look after** means take care of, **find out** means discover, and **set up** means start or establish.

- *She gave up smoking last year.* · *stopped*
- *We found out the results on Monday.* · *discovered*

Separable and inseparable

Many phrasal verbs have an object. Some are **separable**: the object can go between the verb and the particle, or after both. You can say turn off the light or turn the light off.

Phrasal verbs with no object

Some phrasal verbs do not take an object at all: grow up, break down, set off, take off, turn up. For example: The plane took off at six. We set off early. She grew up in Cardiff.

Useful phrasal verbs for IELTS Speaking

Here are common ones, grouped by topic. Learn them in sentences about your own life.

- Study and work: look up a word, hand in an essay, catch up on work, drop out of a course, carry on studying, work out an answer.
- Daily life: wake up, get up, give up a bad habit, cut down on sugar, take up a hobby, turn down the music.
- Family and friends: grow up, bring up children, get on with someone, look after a relative, fall out with a friend, look up to a teacher.
- Travel and places: set off, check in, get around a city, look forward to a holiday, take off, come back.

Phrasal verbs and Writing: when to choose a single verb

Phrasal verbs are not wrong in Writing, but in formal academic writing a single verb with the same meaning usually sounds more precise. In Task 2, compare these pairs:

- find out becomes discover; carry out becomes conduct.
- set up becomes establish; bring about becomes cause.
- go up becomes increase or rise; cut down becomes reduce.
- put off becomes postpone; look into becomes investigate.
- deal with becomes address or manage; give up becomes abandon.

Exercises

1. I need to _____ this word in the dictionary.
 - a. look after
 - b. look up
 - c. look forward
2. He was _____ by his grandparents in a small village.
 - a. brought up
 - b. grown up
 - c. come up
3. I am trying to _____ sugar, but it is very hard.
 - a. cut across
 - b. cut down on
 - c. cut in
4. Students must _____ their essays by Friday.
 - a. hand up
 - b. hand about
 - c. hand in
5. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) Please (2) turn off it (3) before you (4) leave.
6. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) He (2) gave up (3) to smoke (4) last year.
7. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): plane / late. / The / off / took / hour / of / an
8. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): grandmother / looks / her / weekend. / every / up / She / after
9. Correct this: *Switch off it before you leave.*
10. Correct this: *I look forward to see you soon.*

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/phrasal-verbs/practice/

IELTS tip. In Speaking, use two or three phrasal verbs that suit the topic, such as grow up, get on with and look forward to. In Writing, switch to single verbs: investigate, establish, reduce, postpone. This keeps your tone formal without losing clarity.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Phrasal verbs

AIM	Learners understand how phrasal verbs work, use common ones naturally in speaking, and choose single verbs for formal writing.
TIME	35 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Give learners a mixed set of six sentences with phrasal verbs and ask them to guess each meaning from context. Compare with a literal reading.

Lesson steps

1. Show how particles change meaning with one verb (take off, take up, take after, take in) and build a mind map.
2. Teach the separable rule with pronoun practice: learners replace nouns with pronouns in ten sentences.
3. Do a topic sort: learners place twenty phrasal verbs under study, family, travel and daily life.
4. Role-play a Speaking Part 1 interview in which each answer must use one phrasal verb.
5. Learners convert six Speaking sentences into formal Writing by replacing each phrasal verb with a single verb.

Extension

Learners keep a personal phrasal verb notebook over a week, adding three new ones with their own examples each day.

Answer key

1. b) look up. Look up means search for information in a book or online.
2. a) brought up. Bring up means raise a child, and it is common in the passive.
3. b) cut down on. Cut down on means reduce the amount of something.
4. c) hand in. Hand in means give your work to a teacher.
5. Part 2: *turn off it* → **turn it off**. A pronoun object goes between the verb and the particle: turn it off.
6. Part 3: *to smoke* → **smoking**. Give up is followed by the -ing form.
7. The plane took off an hour late. Take off is an intransitive phrasal verb, so it has no object.
8. She looks after her grandmother every weekend. Look after is inseparable: the object comes after the particle.

9. Switch it off before you leave. A pronoun object must come between the verb and the particle.
10. I look forward to seeing you soon. In look forward to, the word to is a preposition, so the verb takes -ing.

Questions learners often ask

What is a phrasal verb? It is a verb plus a particle (up, out, on, off, in) that has a special meaning, for example give up, look after or set off.

Should I use phrasal verbs in IELTS Writing? Use them sparingly. In formal writing, single verbs such as discover, reduce or establish usually sound more precise. Phrasal verbs suit Speaking better.

Where does the object go in a phrasal verb? With separable verbs it can go in the middle or after (turn off the light, turn the light off). A pronoun always goes in the middle: turn it off.

How can I learn phrasal verbs quickly? Learn them by topic, with an example sentence, and say each one aloud. A small set you really use is better than a long list you only recognise.

Sources

- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage, 4th edition. Oxford University Press.
- Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (2006). Cambridge Grammar of English. Cambridge University Press.

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