

Aggie Grammar Guide: Single-Word Verbs vs. Phrasal Verbs

When writing, it's important to consider tone and concision, and one way to influence them is through your choice of verbs.

Single-word verbs are often considered stronger than phrasal verbs (sometimes called multi-word verbs) because single-word verbs allow you to be more direct and concise in your writing. Most phrasal verbs are informal and conversational, but some are academic (e.g., **lead to**, **result in**, **followed by**). Sometimes a phrasal verb is more helpful if no single-word equivalent exists and if you want to be conversational in tone, so it's important to learn how to use both forms.

Difference Between Single-Word Verbs and Phrasal Verbs

Single-word verb in a sentence:

- Example: Mythologies **show** that native people consider their natural environment an important part of their lives.

Phrasal verb in a sentence:

- Example: Mythologies **point out** that native people consider their natural environment an important part of their lives. (The sentence is less concise and less formal because of the use of the phrasal verb.)

How to Form Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs are formed with a verb plus a preposition or adverb and function as a single unit. They can be either transitive or intransitive and either idiomatic or non-idiomatic. One test you can use to determine if you are using an idiomatic or non-idiomatic phrasal verb is to see if you can move the preposition to the start of a sentence and form a grammatical and logical question. If the resulting question is grammatical and logical, you have a non-idiomatic phrasal verb. Here's an example of a phrasal verb that is non-idiomatic adhering to the movement test because moving the preposition creates a grammatically and logically correct question:

- It might make them **think about** using a lot of water.
- **About** what might people **think**?

Here's an example of an idiomatic phrasal verb that violates the movement test because it transforms into an ungrammatical and illogical question:

- I **took out** an unnecessary and confusing sentence.
- ***Out** what did I **take**?

What follows are general rules for using phrasal verbs; however, check a more comprehensive guide for any exceptions.

Idiomatic phrasal verbs:

- Can be transitive¹: I think that the new one is better because I **took out** an unnecessary and confusing sentence.
- Can be intransitive²: I **grew up** learning history from giant, old textbooks from high school that often only shared the American perspective of how the United States came to be.
- Can be separated by an object (only transitive forms): I think that the new one is better because I **took** an unnecessary and confusing sentence **out**.
- Cannot be separated by an adverb.

Non-idiomatic phrasal verbs:

- Can be transitive: The governor is using these water restrictions to make people and their communities **think about** how much they are going to have to pay if they pass the water limit.
- Cannot be intransitive.
- Cannot be separated by an object.
- Can be separated by an adverb: The governor is using these water restrictions to make people and their communities **think** twice **about** how much they are going to have to pay if they pass the water limit.

Sometimes you can use a preposition after a phrasal verb. These constructions are always transitive. Keep in mind that the second preposition is a separate unit from the preposition/adverb attached to the phrasal verb.

- Example: After my teacher **found out** about his sneaky behavior, he came to check and used a pen to mark “COPIED” on the paper. (In this sentence, “about” is a preposition that is not part of the phrasal verb).

¹ A transitive verb requires a direct object in order to form a complete idea.

² An intransitive verb cannot be used with a direct object because the verb is not directing its action towards a noun. Prepositional phrases like “at the people” are not direct objects.

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Intermediate Practice

Without significantly changing meaning, rewrite the following sentences containing phrasal verbs to contain only strong, single-word verbs. There is more than one way to revise each sentence, although you'll only see one option in the answer key. You should make sure your revisions use single-word verbs that match in terms of form and tense with the verbs in the suggested answers.

Please note, because word choice deals with style more than grammar rules, there may be multiple revision options although you will see only one option in the answer key. Compare your revision to the one provided and determine if one is more effective. One way to do that is to determine which revision still maintains the original sentence's meaning.

Example: People can save time by transferring money via phone instead of physically **showing up** in banks and waiting in line.

Answer: People can save time by transferring money via phone instead of physically **going** to banks and waiting in line.

- 1) The author **talks about** how it is harder for her to go back to college each time she **goes back** home.
- 2) I think that the new one is better because I **took out** an unnecessary and confusing sentence.
- 3) I **wrote down** the vocabulary on another sheet of paper from my memory.
- 4) I do not think that telemedicine has the same value as **going to** the doctor.
- 5) I want to **talk about** airplanes' history, airplanes' companies, personal business, global trade, and the benefit for international students and traveling.
- 6) After working on glider experiments they **found out** how to steer a plane while in flight.
- 7) Then the post office will handle the rest and **send** the item **out** to your house.

Advanced Practice

The following paragraph mainly contains phrasal verbs. First, make a list of the phrasal verbs and write a list of possible single-word synonyms next to them. Second, rewrite any sentence that changes structure when you revise to include a single-word verb.

Please note, because word choice deals with style more than grammar rules, there may be multiple single-word and sentence revision options although you will see only one set of options in the answer key. Compare your responses to the ones provided and determine if one is more effective. One way to do that is to determine which revisions still maintain the original sentences' meanings.

I caught on that in today's society, many people are more self-centered. They put themselves first. When they look at anything unjust, they will not stand up and go against wrongdoings. The bystander effect goes far beyond my experience, however. According to James Nye, a reporter of Dailymail.com, many people looked at Brown's murder by a white police officer, but they didn't do anything to help Brown because they waited for someone else to take action. This pluralistic ignorance contributed to Brown's death. The witnesses clearly were conscious of the situation and they knew that that was unjust. However, no one stood up for him because the person who stands entirely for justice, the police officer, was bringing about the unjust behavior. Obviously, we should take action when it is needed. We must not wait or watch for others to do anything for us because it will be too late.

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Answer Key

What follows are options for answers to the practice activities. In reality, many correct answers exist.

Intermediate Practice

- 1) The author **explains** how it is harder for her to go back to college each time she **returns** home.
- 2) I think that the new one is better because I **removed** an unnecessary and confusing sentence.
- 3) I **copied** the vocabulary on another sheet of paper from my memory.
- 4) I do not think that telemedicine has the same value as **visiting** the doctor.
- 5) I want to **discuss** airplanes' history, airplanes' companies, personal business, global trade, and the benefit for international students and traveling.
- 6) After working on glider experiments they **discovered** how to steer a plane while in flight.
- 7) Then the post office will handle the rest and **deliver** the item to your house.

Advanced Practice

What follows is the location of the phrasal verbs in the original paragraph and a chart listing possible synonyms. Below are sentences that need revision after replacement with a single-word verb.

I **caught on** that in today's society, many people are more self-centered. They **put** themselves **first**. When they **look at** anything unjust, they will not **stand up** and **go against** wrongdoings. The bystander effect **goes far beyond** my experience, however. According to James Nye, a reporter of Dailymail.com, many people **looked at** Brown's murder by a white police officer, but they didn't do anything to help Brown because they **waited for** someone else to take action. This pluralistic ignorance **contributed to** Brown's death. The witnesses clearly were conscious of the situation and they knew that that was unjust. However, no one **stood up** for him because the person who **stands** entirely **for** justice, the police officer, was **bringing about** the unjust behavior. Obviously, we should take action when it is needed. We must not wait or **watch for** others to do anything for us because it will be too late.

Phrasal Verb	Single-Word Synonym
caught on	realized, understood, grasped, recognized
put first	prioritize
look at	see, observe, witness, notice
stand up	fight, volunteer
go against	counter, thwart, rectify, oppose
goes beyond	exceeds, transcends
looked at	witnessed, observed, viewed, acknowledged
waited for	expected, assumed, thought, anticipated
contributed to	prompted, effected, affected
stood up	defended, supported
stands for	represents, exemplifies, symbolizes, denotes, embodies
bringing about	doing, producing, creating, acting, behaving
watch for	expect

- 1) The bystander effect far **exceeds** my experience, however. (Note that the adverb moves to before the verb “exceeds.”)
- 2) According to James Nye, a reporter of Dailymail.com, many people looked at Brown’s murder by a white police officer, but they didn’t do anything to help Brown because they **assumed/thought/anticipated** someone else **would** take action.
- 3) However, no one stood up for him because the person who **entirely represents** justice, the police officer, was **acting/behaving unjustly**. (Note that the adverb is moved to before the verb “represents”.)