

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.