

FORMAL WRITING: Phrasal Verbs

A 'verb' is an action, remember? English is scattered with **phrasal verbs**, that is, verbs which consist of more than one word, such as 'give up', 'break down', 'go to', 'pick out'.

Phrasal Verbs are generally of **Germanic** origin, and can commonly have multiple meanings. For example 'pass out' could mean to faint or to distribute.

Phrasal Verbs are avoided in **formal writing** for two reasons:

1. Phrasal Verbs can have multiple meanings, and are highly **idiomatic** (i.e. they vary according to your culture): for example, to 'pay out' can mean to 'give money', but in **Australia** it can also be used to mean 'tease' or 'insult'. Formal writing aims to use standard English and avoid idioms and slang, and using Phrasal Verbs can exclude those not from your own culture. Non native speakers of English particularly struggle with Phrasal Verbs.
2. Phrasal Verbs are common in conversation because they are easy to understand and easy to say. However, when read, they can be **cumbersome** and difficult to follow. They slow the reader down and make your writing seem **cluttered**.

Below is a list of alternative words you can use in your Formal Writing.

TIP:

Use a thesaurus to find alternatives to phrasal verbs. In Microsoft Word, highlight a word and press **SHIFT + F7** to activate the built in thesaurus.

PHR. VERB	ALTERNATIVE
ask out	invite, request
ask around	inquire
back up	reverse, support, sustain, buttress
blow up	explode, inflate
break down	malfunction, fail, collapse
break down	divide, dissect, categorise, classify
break up	end a relationship, fragment
break out	escape
break out in	develop a skin condition
bring down	depress
bring up	raise, educate
bring up	regurgitate
call around	enquire
call off	cancel
call on	request, visit
call up	phone
calm down	relax, settle
check in	register, update
check out	investigate, observe
cheer up	enliven, brighten
chip in	help, assist, aid
clean up	tidy, clean
come across	locate
come apart	separate
come down	develop (illness), topple, demolish

PHR. VERB	ALTERNATIVE
come forward	volunteer
come from	originate
count on	rely
cross out	eliminate
cut back on	consume less
cut down	decrease, reduce
cut in	interrupt, interfere
cut off	stop providing
cut out	remove
do over	retry, repeat, revise
do away with	discard
do up	fasten, close
dress up	wear nice clothing
do over	retry, repeat, revise
do away with	discard
do up	fasten, close
do over	retry, repeat, revise
do up	fasten, close
dress up	wear nice clothing
drop off	deposit, deliver, unload
drop out	withdraw, abandon
eat out	dine
fall apart / down	disintegrate, crumble, collapse
fall out	argue, loosen
figure out	understand, discern, discover, comprehend, solve, decipher
fill in / out	complete (a form)

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PHR. VERB	ALTERNATIVE
find out	discover
get across/over	communicate, make understandable
get along/ on/with	manage, cope, cohabit, progress
get away	leave, escape, retreat, flee, depart
get back	return, receive, retrieve, retaliate
get on	board, climb, mount
get over	recover, overcome
get round to	finally achieve
get together	meet
get up	stand, rise
give away	reveal, gift
give in	surrender, concede/admit defeat, resign, yield, submit
give out	distribute, provide
give up	quit
go against	compete, oppose
go out with	date
go over	review
go without	deprive, deny, remove
grow up	become an adult, mature
hand in	submit
hand out	distribute
hang out	relax
hold back	prevent
hold on	wait, grasp, grip, clasp, clutch, persevere, persist
keep on / up	continue
let down	disappoint
let in	admit
look after	care
look down on	consider inferior
look forward to	anticipate
look into	investigate
look out for	watch, view
look over	check, examine
look up	research, investigate, study, explore, examine
look up to	respect, admire
make up	invent, lie, forgive, apply cosmetics
mix up	confuse, muddle
pass away	die
pass out	faint
pass up	decline

PHR. VERB	ALTERNATIVE
pay for	be punished, finance, fund, sponsor, provide
pick out	choose
point out	indicate
put down / out	insult, ridicule, tease
put off	postpone
put out	extinguish
put together	assemble
put up with	tolerate
run over	crush, hit, squash, flatten, collide, cover, rehearse
run away	leave unexpectedly, escape
run out	end, expire, finish
send back	return
set up	arrange, organise, trick
shop around	compare prices
show off	boast, brag, pose, display, flaunt
sort out	organise, resolve a problem
take after	resemble
take back	return
take out / off	remove
tear up	shred, destroy
think back	remember, review
think over	consider
throw away	dispose
turn down	refuse, decrease
turn off	stop the energy flow, switch off
turn up	increase the volume or strength (heat, light etc)
turn up	appear suddenly
try on	sample
try out	test
use up	finish the supply
wake up	awaken, wake, stir, rouse, revive, animate
warm up	prepare body for exercise, heat, thaw, prepare, stretch, increase temperature
work out	exercise, be successful
work out	make a calculation

List Adapted from: English Club. 2013. *Phrasal Verbs List*. [online] Available at: <http://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/phrasal-verbs-list.htm> [Accessed: 24 Aug 2013].

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