

English Grammar: Phrasal Verbs - Split or Not?

Phrasal verbs are verbs that are created by combining a “root verb” with a preposition. The combined words have a new meaning. For example, “work” is a verb that means “do labor” (“she works in a factory”) or “function” (“my car is old, but it still works”). The word “out” is a preposition, and if you put these two words together, you have “work out”, which can mean “resolve” (“let’s work out our problems”), or “exercise” (“I work out at the gym every day”) or “calculate” (“this calculation is difficult to work out”).



Sometimes you can “**split**” a phrasal verb, which means that you can put a noun in the middle. For example, “work out” can mean “resolve”. So we can say “he worked out his problems” or “he worked his problems out”. In the second form, we say that the phrasal verb is “split”.

Some phrasal verbs can’t be split. For example “take off” can mean “leave (airplane)” or “remove (clothes)”. In the first case, we can’t split the phrasal verb, we say “the airplane took off at 6am”. In the second case, we can split the phrasal verb: “he took off his shoes” or “he took his shoes off”.

Rule 1:

If a phrasal verb is intransitive (doesn’t need a direct object), it can’t be split.

If a phrasal verb is transitive (needs a direct object), it can be split – by the direct object.

“the airplane took off”

“he took off his shoes
or
“he took his shoes off”

If we use a pronoun (me, you, him, her, it, us, them, this, that, these, those), then we must split the phrasal verb (“he took them off”).

Rule 2:

We must split a transitive phrasal verb when using a pronoun.

he took them off

he took off them

Examples of transitive phrasal verbs (which need a direct object):

blow up (explode), bring up (raise), call off (cancel), check out (see), close down (terminate), fill in (complete), find out (discover), hand over (give), leave out (exclude), let down (disappoint), pick up (fetch), put away (store), put down (drop), put on (wear clothes), take off (remove clothes), take out (on a date), turn down (reduce), turn up (increase), turn on (activate), turn off (deactivate), wake up (disturb), work out (resolve)

Examples of intransitive phrasal verbs (which have no direct object):

check out (leave hotel), get up (rise), go on (continue), go out (exit), take off (airplane), wake up (stop sleep), work out (exercise)

Intransitive examples:

- We need to check out at midday. *(intransitive -> no split)*
- I wake up every day at 6am. *(intransitive -> no split)*
- She goes out every Saturday night. *(intransitive -> no split)*

Transitive examples:

- John always takes out his wife on Fridays.
John always takes his wife out on Fridays. *(transitive -> optional split)*
John always takes her out on Fridays. *(transitive + pronoun -> must split)*
- The terrorists blew up the school.
The terrorists blew the school up. *(transitive -> optional split)*
The terrorists blew it up. *(transitive + pronoun -> must split)*
- Please turn on the TV.
Please turn the TV on. *(transitive -> optional split)*
Please turn it on. *(transitive + pronoun -> must split)*

Splitting a phrasal verb with one, two or three words is acceptable, but it can be confusing:

- I picked the cat up.
- I picked the old cat up.
- I picked the big, old cat up.
- I picked the big, black, ugly, old, striped cat up. *(possible, but confusing)*
- I picked up the big, black, ugly, old, striped cat. *(better, less confusing)*

Exceptions. There are some transitive phrasal verbs which we don't split. For example:

- look into:** *(investigate)* The situation is really bad. We really must **look into it**.
- look after:** *(care)* My mum is very sick. I **look after her** every day.
- look for:** *(search)* Have you seen my laptop? I'm **looking for it**.
- get over:** *(surpass)* The death of my sister was so tragic. I will never **get over it**.
- come across:** *(find)* Here's a rare bible. I **came across it** yesterday in the library.

Summary

1) Transitive (direct object) + noun -> split is **optional**:

We need to work out our problem.

We need to work our problem out.

2) Transitive + pronoun -> split is **obligatory**:

We need to work it out.

3) Intransitive (no direct object) - split is **not possible**:

I work out at the gym three times a week.

Exercise. Substitute the highlighted verbs with the given phrasal verbs, conjugating and splitting if necessary.

1. Did you know that Adolf Hitler was an artist? I **discovered** it at school yesterday. (*find out*)

2. We need to **rise** at 6am tomorrow. (*get up*)

3. Please don't **exclude** me this time! (*leave out*)

4. I **dropped** the bag, because it was so heavy. (*put down*)

5. Can you please **reduce** the TV volume? (*turn down*)

6. Where are my sandals? I want to **wear** them. (*put on*)

7. Please don't **disappoint** me. (*let down*)

8. My son never **stores** his clothes in his wardrobe. (*put away*)

9. My brother **exercises** at home nearly every day. He is super fit! (*work out*)

10. **See** this! It's a fantastic video about blue whales! (*check out*)
