

Phrasal verbs are verbs comprised of two parts: a verb and a particle. The particle is also called a “helper.” Phrasal verbs can be imprecise, so we’re going to help you identify them so that you can ensure clarity in your writing.

First, the key to understanding a phrasal verb is to understand whether a verb is phrasal or not. A verb is phrasal if the “helper” changes the meaning of the action.

Not phrasal: I **dropped** the rock off the cliff.

In this case, the verb (to drop) is not altered by the preposition (off); rather, the preposition (off) describes the location of the rock.

Phrasal: I will **drop off** Conrad when the movie is over.

Here, the preposition (off) does not describe the location of Conrad; rather, the preposition (off) alters the verb (to drop). You did not drop Conrad (to cause him to fall); rather, you are bringing him to a location.

Secondly, be aware that phrasal verbs can be separable and inseparable. If the verb and the “helper” can have a word/words (the object) placed between them, the phrasal verb is separable.

Phrasal and separable: I will **drop** Conrad **off** when the movie is over.

We can put the object of the sentence (Conrad) between the verb (drop) and the helper (off), and the sentence makes sense.

Thirdly, some phrasal verbs can be both separable and inseparable.

Phrasal/Inseparable: The depth of the water **dropped off** just inches from the shore.

The depth of the water **dropped** just inches **off** from the shore. This sentence makes no sense with the helper moved; therefore, the phrasal verb is inseparable. In this instance, the phrasal verb in its inseparable form has a different meaning. To drop off, in this example, means to decline suddenly.

Common Phrasal Verbs to Avoid in Academic Writing

| Phrasal Verb | Likely Replacements |
|---------------------|--|
| back up (S) | <i>support, buttress</i> |
| come upon (I) | <i>discover</i> |
| copy down (S) | <i>record</i> |
| fall apart (I) | <i>disintegrate, collapsed</i> |
| get across (I or S) | <i>(I) clearly stated, (S) convey</i> |
| keep up (S) | <i>maintain, sustain</i> |
| pick out (S) | <i>determine, identify, discern</i> |
| think over (S) | <i>contemplate, deliberate, consider</i> |

| Phrasal Verb | Likely Replacements |
|------------------|---|
| bring up (S) | <i>advance, discuss, propose, raise</i> |
| come up with (I) | <i>suggest, create, contrive, produce</i> |
| dig up (S) | <i>detect, discover, expose, uncover</i> |
| find out (S) | <i>ascertain, identify, observe</i> |
| get at (I) | <i>access, imply</i> |
| leave out (S) | <i>exclude, dismiss, discard</i> |
| set up (S) | <i>arrange, construct, establish</i> |
| write down (S) | <i>record</i> |