

Ask About English

Phrasal Verbs

Hiba asks:

Please can you tell me a little more about phrasal verbs? I find it really difficult to learn phrasal verbs, can you explain why? Would it be helpful if I memorise a whole list of them? Do I really need to learn them all?

Martin replies:

Phrasal verbs consist of two words – they are two-word verbs.

A phrasal verb is a verb, followed by a preposition or an adverb.

For example: ‘set up’ – ‘set in’ – ‘set off’ – ‘set out’ - ‘put by’ – ‘put through’ – ‘put off’.

Two problems

There are two problems with phrasal verbs.

The first is that there is no way of telling what they mean just by looking at the individual words. The meaning of ‘put off’ may have nothing to do with ‘put’ and nothing to do with ‘off’.

The other problem with phrasal verbs is that one phrasal verb may have several meanings and it's only by looking at the context that we can tell which meaning it has in any situation.

Here are some examples of phrasal verbs:

'put off'

I can ‘put off’ a meeting. This means that I change the time until a later time. But I can also ‘put somebody off’ and that can mean that I upset them, or I do something which makes them dislike me; a completely different meaning!

'set out'

The very common meaning of ‘set out’ is to begin a journey; so we might say I ‘set out’ at 6 o'clock, or I ‘set out’ from home. But it can also mean to put things into a particular order - so before I start working for example, I start with an empty table and I ‘set out’

my pens and my pencils, my books and everything on the table, which means I put them into the correct places.

'make up'

The most common meaning is probably to invent something, to make up a story (which is to tell a story that isn't true); to 'make up' an excuse.

Anna: Are there any easy ways that a learner can remember the differences between these phrasal verbs?

Martin: Unfortunately no.

Learning lists

A lot of learners spend time trying to learn lists of them, or learning the phrasal verb and the translations, and that isn't so useful.

Context

The most useful thing to do is to read and to pay attention to the context they come in. The context is very important. Often learners can understand the meaning from the context and may not come across that phrasal verb again ever, as long as they live. So I think trying to learn them all isn't a very useful thing.

There are lots of books available, which have names like '**Teach Yourself Phrasal Verbs**', '**Learn Phrasal Verbs**' and the good ones always have a context. So they introduce them in a context & it's in that context that the learner needs to try and remember them.

The other really good thing is that you don't need to learn phrasal verbs - you can nearly always find another way of expressing yourself. Using phrasal verb if you're confident helps you to sound more idiomatic & more English - but you can still express yourself, if you're not confident.

Anna: So that's the easy way out then: just don't use them!

Martin: Yes, but you do need to understand them and you can use your dictionary to help you - but even using the dictionary can be a problem because you will find lots of meaning for one phrasal verb. Look at the context, try and work it out from the context is my advice.