

Multi-word Verbs

Multi-word verbs are verbs that consist of more than one word. There are three types of multiword verbs: prepositional verbs, phrasal verbs, and phrasal-prepositional verbs.

Many multi-word verbs serve an idiomatic purpose. This means that they should not be taken literally; rather, they have a figurative or metaphorical meaning. Examples:

Run into means “encounter”: I ran into an old friend at the reunion. Come by means “visit”: She came by the store this morning. Put up with means “tolerate”: I shouldn’t have to put up with this nonsense.

You will have to memorize the idiomatic meanings of most multi-word verbs in order to learn how to use them.

Prepositional Verbs

Prepositional verbs consist of a main verb and a preposition.

A preposition links a noun or pronoun to other words in a sentence. Prepositions are often used to show relationships (often in logic, space, or time) between the noun and the rest of the sentence. Prepositions introduce a prepositional phrase, which consists of the preposition and an object.

I ran into my roommate on my way to class. In this example, ran is the main verb, and into is the preposition which introduces the prepositional phrase into my roommate. Together, they make up the prepositional verb ran into.

Phrasal Verbs

Phrasal verbs consist of a main verb and a particle. A particle is a function word that does not have meaning on its own and depends on the main verb to have meaning. Our car broke down on the way home from Tulsa. In this example, broke is the main verb, and down is the particle. Notice that down cannot be a preposition in this case because there is no following prepositional phrase—there is no object of the preposition.)

Phrasal-prepositional Verbs

Phrasal-prepositional verbs consist of a main verb, a particle, and a preposition—in that order. The attendees grew restless when they learned we had run out of pizza. In this example, run is the main verb, out is the particle, and of is the preposition which introduces the prepositional phrase of pizza.

Examples of Common Multi-word Verbs and their Meanings

Common Multi-word Verbs and their Meanings
Add up to = cost All the groceries added up to \$50.00.
Back up = reverse The car backed up before speeding out of the parking lot.
defend or support Rob backed up Sally's alibi.
Break down = stop working Our garbage disposal broke down yesterday.
divide into parts The teacher broke down the assignment part-by-part.
Call off = cancel Andy called off the meeting after he got sick.
Calm down = relax Calm down and take a deep breath.
Come across = find Walking on the shore, I came across a message in a bottle.
Come by = visit I just came by to say hello.
Dress up = put on nice clothes You should dress up for your job interview.
put on a costume The kids dressed up as ghosts for Halloween.
Drop in/drop by = visit My aunt Sally dropped in on her way home.
Figure out = come to understand It took us two hours to figure out the answer to his

riddle. Fill in/fill out = complete a form You have to fill out a lot of paperwork to run for president. Find out = discover Will we ever find out the meaning of life? Get away with = avoid punishment The thief came close to getting away with his crime. Get rid of = dispose of This bug spray should get rid of your roach problem. Give away = reveal a secret Don't give away the ending to the movie. Give in/give up = concede After hours of fighting, the boxer finally gave in. Go over = review The professor went over the answers to the exam. Hand in/turn in = submit The students were asked to hand in their homework. Hang out with = join Ask Jerry if he wants to hang out with us tonight. Keep up = continue Keep up the good work! Let down = disappoint Don't let me down by dropping out of school. Load up on = stockpile Before you go hiking, load up on food and water. Look after = supervise Who will look after the kids? Look down on = think less of You shouldn't look down on people with less money. Look forward to = anticipate I look forward to meeting you in person. Look into = investigate The chief promised he'd look into the charges of bribery. Look out for = protect The babysitter promised he would look out for the kids. be vigilant about If you go surfing, look out for sharks. Look over = examine Have an editor look over your draft before you turn it in. Look up to = respect I look up to the hard-working executive. Make up = fabricate, invent He made up that story about the haunted house. forgive (each other) We had a nasty fight, but we made up the next morning. Pass away = die She passed away at the age of 99. Pass out = faint Taylor passed out after spending too much time in the heat. distribute The professor passed out a study guide for the exam. Pick out = choose Pick out your favorite t-shirt and I'll buy it for you. Put off = postpone He put off the meeting until he started feeling better. Put up with = tolerate I can only put up with so much misbehavior. Run into = encounter I ran into an old friend at the reunion. Run out of = be

depleted You don't want to run out of gas around here. Set up = organize We set up a club devoted to studying Shakespeare. Sit in for = substitute Ms. Brown is sitting in for Mr. Jones at the meeting. Split up = divide Ms. Maple split up the class into three groups. Stand by = defend or support We stand by our decision. Think over = consider You should think over your decision. Throw away = dispose of Throw away your trash before you leave the park. Try out = test Try out this new vacuum cleaner on your carpet. Turn down = refuse Joe surprised us all by turning down the promotion. Use up = deplete The planet used up all of its uranium reserves.