

**EC Fundamentals**

**PHRASAL  
VERBS**

VOL. 1

An illustrated guide for English Learners

VERB + ADVERB  
+ PREPOSITION



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## What is a phrasal verb?

Phrasal verbs are a rather complex piece of language, and language learners often have trouble connecting some phrasal verbs to their meanings. Why is that?

A phrasal verb has a different meaning to that of the original verb – but this is also what makes them fun! Let's take a look at the structure of a phrasal verb:

(verb) + (preposition)  
(verb) + (adverb)  
(verb) + (adverb) + (preposition) ] = a phrasal verb

Phrasal verbs are used quite often in everyday speech, usually in place of a more formal expression. Here are a couple of examples:

I need to write an essay by next week, but I keep postponing it.<sup>1</sup>  
I need to write an essay by next week, but I keep putting it off.

She was seen exiting the car at 7 pm.  
She was seen getting out of the car at 7 pm.

**But wait!** There are many verbs in English which are followed by prepositions or adverbs **used in a literal sense**. When something is described as **'literal'**, it is to be taken in its *most basic sense*:

If you look up, you will see a beautiful blue sky. [Literal]

I don't know what this word mean. I'm going to look it up in a dictionary. [Meaning 'to search for']

## Transitive and Intransitive Phrasal Verbs

A phrasal verb can be **transitive** or **intransitive**. The best way to understand the difference between these two types of verbs is by trying to find the **direct object**. The direct object is a **noun** or **noun phrase** referring to a person or thing which is receiving the action of a transitive verb. To sum up -

Transitive phrasal verbs **have a direct object**:

**E.g.** I will **set up** a meeting with the manager.  
*What is being 'set up'? The meeting with the manager.*  
John **gave up** smoking 5 years ago.  
*What did John 'give up' 5 years ago? Smoking.*

Intransitive phrasal verbs have **no direct object**:

**E.g.** Francesco said he would meet us at 6pm, but he never **showed up**.  
Katy **grew up** in Brighton, England.

**Remember!** Some phrasal verbs can be both transitive and intransitive, with different meanings:

**E.g.** look up

**Transitive:** It is important to **look up** any new vocabulary in a dictionary.  
- Here, 'look up' means to search for something.

**Intransitive:** It has been a difficult year, but things are starting to **look up**.  
- Now, 'look up' means to get better or improve.

## Separable and Inseparable Phrasal Verbs

A large number of phrasal verbs are transitive, meaning that they take an object. There are some specific rules for using this type of phrasal verb.

Let's take a look at some examples:

**E.g.** write down [separable]  
Ali **wrote down** some important notes during the lesson.  
Ali **wrote** everything **down** during the lesson.

**E.g.** run into<sup>2</sup> [inseparable]  
We always **run into** Daniel at parties. **Correct :)**  
~~We always run Daniel into parties.~~ **Incorrect :(**

**Okay, let's review what we know about phrasal verbs:**

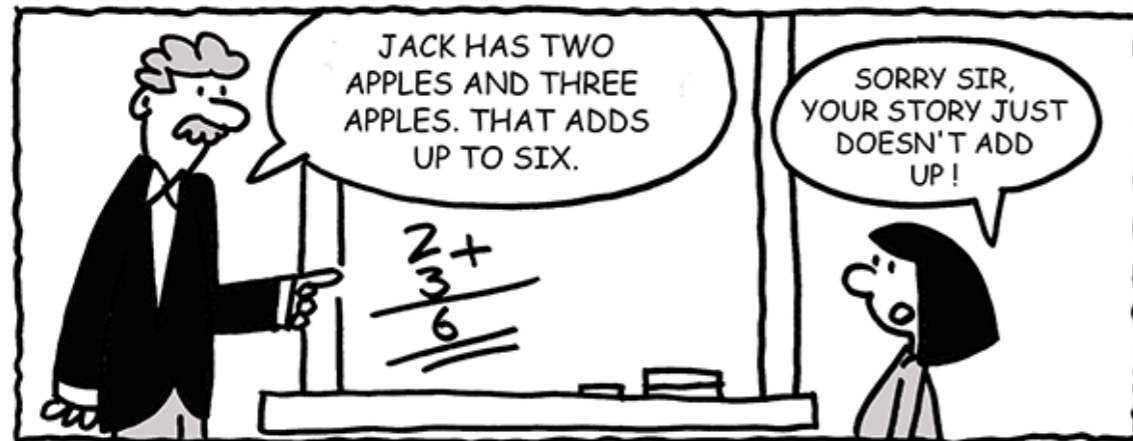
1. The meaning of a phrasal verb is different from the meaning of its separate parts.
2. An intransitive verb cannot be followed by an object.
3. A transitive verb can be followed by an object.
4. Some transitive verbs can be separated. The object goes between the verb and the preposition.
5. Some transitive phrasal verbs are inseparable. The object is placed after the preposition.
6. Some transitive phrasal verbs can take an object in both places.

<sup>1</sup> To postpone (something): to do something at a later time than you first planned.

<sup>2</sup> To run into: to meet someone unexpectedly, without planning to do so.

There are hundreds of phrasal verbs in the English language. Let's take a look at some illustrated examples of some of the most useful ones!

### Add Up



The phrasal verb 'add up' can be used in two main ways.

'Add up' also means 'to make sense': His theory doesn't add up. I don't think he did enough research. (His ideas were not clear or logical)

'Add up to' is used to talk about an equalled amount, e.g. The total bill added up to \$10. (My food cost \$5 and my friend's food cost \$5. \$5 + \$5 = \$10)

### Drop Off



In this situation, to 'drop off' is a phrasal verb which means to fall asleep.

'Drop off' has quite a few different meanings, depending on the situation or context:

**1. Similar to 'fall'**

The boys **dropped stones off** the cliff.

**2. An informal way of saying 'fall asleep'**

I **dropped off** while watching TV last night

**3. To gradually decline/ become less**

Sales **dropped off** at the end of the month

**4. To stop somewhere for someone**

Could you **drop me off** at the station?

**5. To stop and give something to someone**

Could you **drop this letter off** at the post office for me?

### Break Down



The phrasal verb **Break down + noun** can be used to talk about analysing something in detail: "You need to break down the maths problem in order to solve it properly."

'Break down' is also used to talk about something that has stopped working properly: Can you please come and pick me up from work? My car has broken down. (My car is not working, so could you please come and get me with your car?)

'Break down' can be used to describe a person who has started to cry because they are under a lot of stress or a experiencing something very negative: When she found out the news of her friend's death she broke down in tears. (She heard some very bad news and started to cry uncontrollably)

### Pick Up



In the cartoon above, 'pick (it) up' means to lift something up off the ground. The man in the picture is picking the rubbish bin up to put the rubbish into the truck. Let's take a look at just how many different meaning this phrasal verb can have:

**1. To lift an object with the hands**

Keep your back straight when you **pick the TV up**.

**2. To learn something without effort**

It's possible to **pick up enough English** in two weeks to get by on your trip to London.

**3. To go and get someone in a car'**

What time are you going to **pick me up**.

**4. To try to start a relationship with someone you do not know.**

'Some strange man tried to **pick up Lucy** in the bar.'

**5. To grow or increase**

'Business is really **picking up** this month.'



## Put Out



In this situation, the man and woman have misunderstood<sup>3</sup> each other because 'put out' has a few different meanings. The woman wants to ask the man if he let the cat out (perhaps into the garden), but he thinks she is asking him whether or not he poured water onto the cat because it was on fire (the cat was not on fire). 'Put out' can mean:

### 1. To put something outside the house

Did you **put the cat out**?

I must remember to **put the rubbish out** on Wednesday night.

### 2. To extinguish<sup>4</sup> something

The firefighters quickly **put out the fire**.

You can't smoke in here, please **put your cigarette out**.

### 3. To inconvenience someone or to be annoyed

I don't want to **put you out**, but could you drive me to the station?

He was **put out** because we didn't invite him to the party.

### 4. To publish or produce something for the public

We **put out** 'English in your Inbox' every month.

### 5. To injure a part of your body by straining yourself

He **put his back out** trying to lift his sofa.

## Step On



Understood literally, to 'step on' something means to walk over something and stand on it with your foot (e.g. I stepped on some chewing gum).

'Step on (it)' is an informal way of telling someone to move quickly or to hurry up.

**Step on it, taxi driver, or I'm going to be late for my flight!**

<sup>3</sup>To misunderstand: a failure to understand something correctly or in the way it was meant.

<sup>4</sup>To extinguish: to stop a fire from burning (e.g. using water).

## Dawn On



'Dawn' is a noun which means 'the time early in the morning when the sun first appears'.  
*She woke up at dawn.*

If we add the preposition 'on', what we get is the phrasal verb '**dawn on (somebody)**'. When something **dawns on you**, you realise it for the first time. You suddenly understand something after not understanding it.

*I was going to call her then it **dawned on me** that I didn't know her phone number.*

*It finally **dawned on him** what the problem was.*

## Fall Out



In the cartoon the birds might 'separate' from their nest (fall from the nest onto the ground), or you might **fall out** of your bed at night!

'To **fall out**' can also mean to stop being friends with someone because you argued<sup>5</sup> with them.

*I'm not speaking to Jean anymore. **We fell out** last week when she said she didn't like my new boyfriend. (We had an argument<sup>6</sup> because she did not like my new boyfriend)*

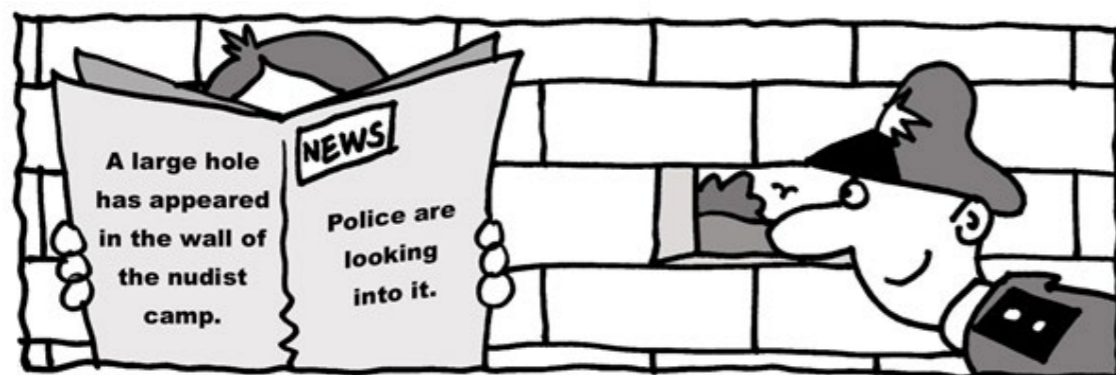
When using 'fall out' in this sense, we can add the preposition '**over**' to show **what** the argument was about:

*We were good friends, but **we fell out over** a boy we both liked. (We're not friends anymore because we both liked the same boy)*

<sup>5</sup>To argue: to disagree with someone verbally.

<sup>6</sup>Argument (noun): an exchange of opposite opinions, typically a heated or angry one.

## Look Into



**Note:** A nudist camp is a place where people go camping and don't wear any clothes! They are nude: They are not wearing any clothes.

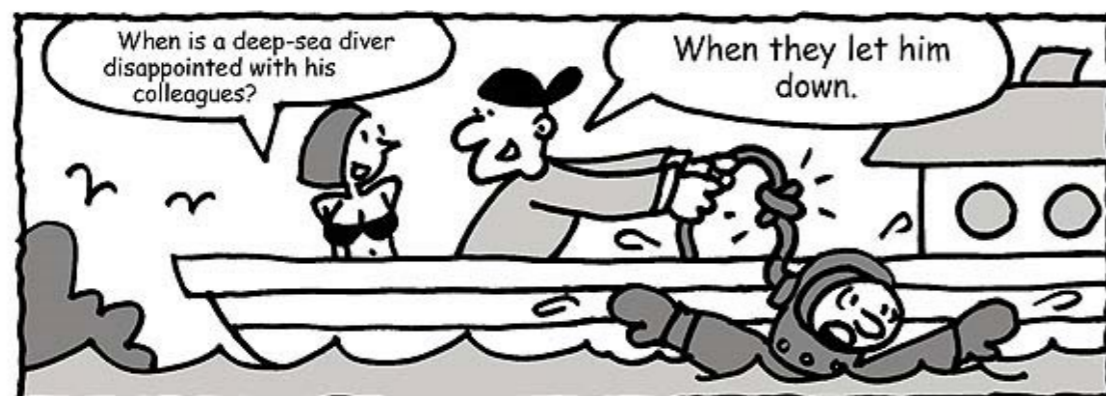
'To look into' usually means to investigate or research something specific.

*I'll look into the problem and try and find a solution.*

But 'to look into' can also mean to look **inside** something.

*'Look into my eyes and tell me the truth.'*

## Let Down



This cartoon is using 'let down' as part of a joke. To understand this joke, we need to look at the two possible meanings of the phrasal verb:

'To let down' means to disappoint someone. When we **let someone down** we disappoint them.

*You can trust Cristian to help you. He never lets his friends down.*

'To let down' also means to lower something. As you can see in the picture, the diver is being let down (lowered) into the sea.

*Let down the ladder so that I can climb up.*

## Hold Up



This is another joke, and to understand it we need to take a quick look at the following two meanings of the phrasal verb:

'To hold up' literally means to hold something/someone up in the air with your hands (like the police officer in the cartoon).

*When we landed in the airport our driver was waiting for us; he was holding up a sign with our names on it.*

'To hold up' can also mean to stop/delay someone for a moment.

*You can go if you want to - don't let me **hold you up**.*

**Just a minute!** 'Hold up' can also be used as a noun meaning to conduct a robbery using threats and/or violence. Think of a film you've watched where the bad guys rob a bank – that's a hold up!

*There was a hold up at the local bank this morning. Thankfully, no one was injured and the bank-robbers were arrested by police.*

## Act Up



You probably know that the verb **to act** is used to talk about actors starring in a film or performing in the theatre. When used as a phrasal verb with the preposition up it has a different meaning:

'To act up' means to misbehave; behave badly or strangely.

*My computer has been **acting up** recently. I think it has a virus.*

<sup>7</sup>To disappoint: to fail to fulfil (someone's) expectations or wishes



## Look Up

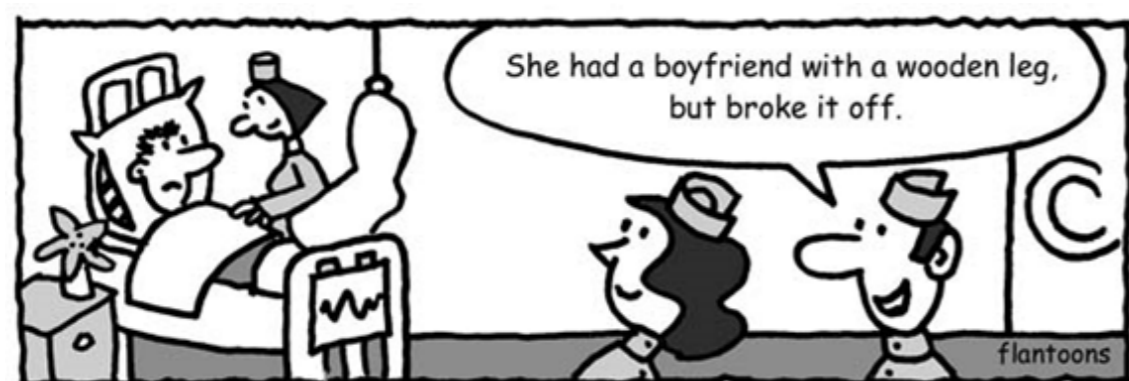


As you know, we 'look up' at something that is above us (like the sky, moon, or stars). For example you can look up at a tall building or look up at a bird in the sky. But did you know that it can also be used in the following way?

'To look up' also means to get better; to improve.

The weather was terrible earlier, now it's starting to **look up**.

## Break Off



The verb 'to break (something)' means to divide, split, or smash something using force (e.g. I broke a plate!). Add the preposition 'off', and we have a phrasal verb with two different meanings:

'To break off' means to separate or become separated, as by twisting or tearing:

Do you want some of my chocolate? I'll **break off** a piece for you.

Do you want some of my chocolate? I'll **break a piece off** for you.

'To break off' also means to end (a relationship).

My sister and her boyfriend have **broken off** their engagement. (They are no longer engaged, they will not get married)

<sup>8</sup>To star: to appear as a famous person in a film or TV show. Usually used to talk about actors and performers.

<sup>9</sup>To perform: to act, sing, or play a musical instrument. Can also mean 'to do' (e.g. The doctor performed a serious operation.)

<sup>10</sup>Engagement: noun, the state of being engaged to someone (i.e. after you ask someone to marry you).

## Back Up



What is he talking about? Time to take a quick look at the double meaning of 'back up':

The phrasal verb 'back up' is generally meant in the sense of 'to move backwards'. When driving we also say 'reverse'.

**Back up** your car into the garage.

In the world of technology, 'to back up' means to save an extra copy of your work in a safe location, just in case something happens to the original.

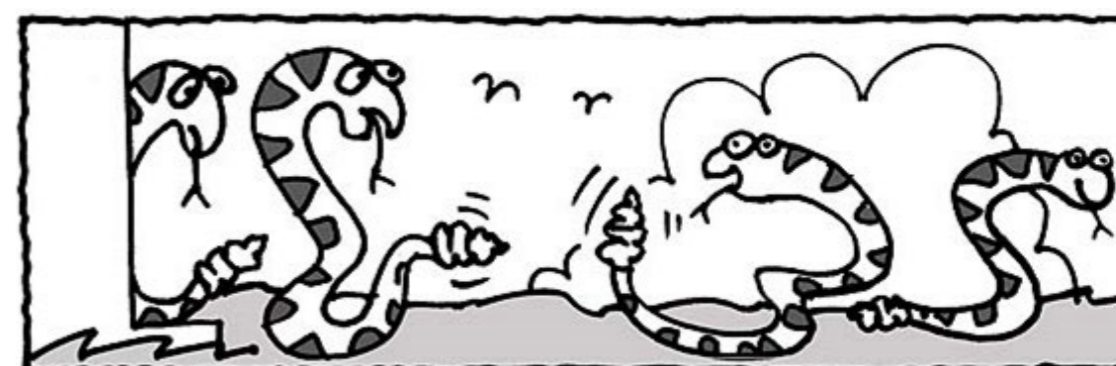
Remember to **back up** your files – you wouldn't want to lose all your hard work!

But 'backup' (no space between the two words) can also be used as a noun, meaning help/ support or a copy of a file made in case the original is lost or damaged.

The police officer called his partner for **back up**. He needed help arresting the burglar.

Do you have a **backup** of your work? There's nothing on this CD.

## Strike Out



It was a sad day for the rattlesnake family, when the time came for the children to **strike out** on their own.

What's happening in the cartoon above? The phrasal verb **strike out** has the following meaning:

'To strike out' - to start doing something new while being independent of other people.

After living with his family for 21 years, he decided it was time to **strike out** on his own.

## Get Over



The phrasal verb **get over** is used quite frequently in every day speech, so it's important that we understand the two meanings.

'To **get over**' means to get to the other side of something, usually by jumping or climbing. For examples, the boys in the picture need to get over the hurdles to complete the race.

*The schoolboy finished last in the hurdle-race because he was too short to **get over** the hurdles.*<sup>11</sup>

'To **get over**' also means 'to recover from something', to feel better after having a sickness or problem  
*It took me a few days to get over my cold.*

*She was very upset when her relationship ended, but she got over it and she's happy now.*

## Put Down



In this cartoon, the phrasal verb '**put down**' has two primary meanings.

To stop holding something and place it somewhere.

*Slowly **put down** the gun and keep your hands where I can see them.*

*Slowly **put** the gun **down** and keep your hands where I can see them.*

**Wait a second!** We also use '**can't put (something) down**' as an idiom to describe something we are reading that is so interesting that we don't want to stop reading it.

*Have you read the new Harry Potter book? It's impossible to put down.*

*The novel was so exciting that I couldn't put it down. I read it all night.*

**We're not done yet – there's one more meaning to look at before we continue:**

'To **put down**' can also mean 'to say something negative to someone because you want to make them feel less confident.'

*Katerina doesn't like his new boss. He keeps **putting people down** and the employees are unhappy.*

<sup>11</sup> Hurdle: noun, one of a series of structures over which athletes in a race must jump.

## Bring Down



The joke in this cartoon is focusing on a play on the phrasal verb 'to bring down'. What does 'bring down' mean?

'To **bring down**' means 'to make someone feel sad or depressed, unhappy or exhausted.'

*This rainy weather is really **bringing me down**.* (The weather is making me feel sad)

Also, you can either go 'up' or 'down' in an elevator. The second part of the joke is based on the word **uplifting** – an adjective used to describe something which makes someone feel better or more cheerful:

*The singer gave a very **uplifting** performance.*

Note: **Elevator** is used in American English; **Lift** is used in British English.

## Let Down



'To **let down**' means to deflate it (let the air out of it) – like what happened to the man's old bouncy castle in the cartoon.

*You have put too much air in your car tires. You should **let them down** a little.*

'To **let down**' can also mean 'to disappoint someone.'

*I felt like I **let down** my parents when I failed my exam.*

*I felt like I **let** my parents **down** when I failed my exam.*



### Brush Off



'To brush off' literally means to remove something from someone or something by brushing.

*I brushed a little dust off her shoulder.*

'To brush off' also means 'to ignore someone'; 'to refuse to talk or be nice to someone,' or 'to purposely not give any attention to someone/something'.

*She brushed him off and told him she was too busy to talk to him.*

### Drift Apart



Let's look at the verb drift and the phrasal verb drift apart:

To drift (verb) means when something is carried by the movement of water (or air) slowly.

*Didn't you notice that the boat was starting to drift out to sea?*

'To drift apart' is a phrasal verb which means 'to slowly stop being close to or friends with someone'; 'to lose personal contact over time'.

*The two men, who had been friends since school, drifted apart after they started working for different companies.*

We can also use the verb 'drift' with the preposition 'off' to create another phrasal verb!

'To drift off' means to slowly fall asleep.

*I was so tired that I drifted off as soon as my head touched the pillow.*

### Bring Up



'To bring up' is the present tense form of 'brought up'. When people raise a child and take care of it, they bring it up.

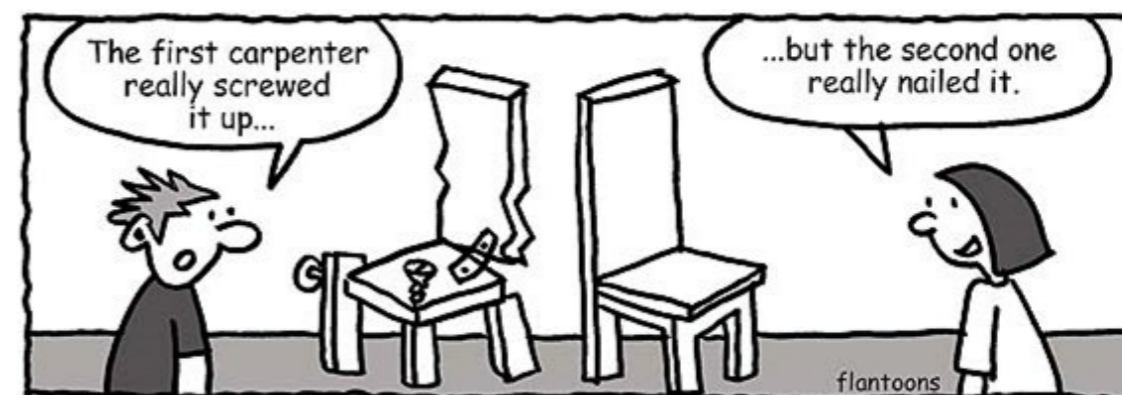
*My parents divorced when I was young. I was mainly brought up by my mother.*

*His parents worked all the time when he was a child, so he was brought up by his grandparents.*

It can also be used when talking about where you are from:

*I live in Malta, but I was brought up in London.*

### Screw up



When you 'screw (something) up', it means that 'to do something incorrectly, with a negative result'. This is a very informal way of saying that you've messed something up.

*I don't know what I did, but I think I screwed up my computer.*

In the cartoon, the girl says that 'the second one (carpenter) really nailed it'. The expression 'nailed it' is an informal way of saying that someone **did something in a perfect or impressive way**.

*I was worried about the job interview but it went well. I think I nailed it.*

### Test your knowledge

Now that you've found out all about these phrasal verbs, it's time to test your knowledge. Use these exercises to make sure that you've understood the meaning behind each phrasal verb, then check your answers on the last page.

#### Exercise 1:

Fill in the blanks with the correct phrasal verb. Don't forget to change the tense, if required.

Drop off, put out, add up, pick up, step on, fall out, break down

- I don't understand your point. What you're saying just doesn't \_\_\_\_\_.
- When Francis heard about the death of the family dog, he \_\_\_\_\_ and started to cry.
- If you're having trouble sleeping, try drinking some warm milk before bed. That usually helps me \_\_\_\_\_ quite quickly.
- Could you please \_\_\_\_\_ your sister from the airport? My car is being repaired by the mechanic.
- We thought the graduation party would be amazing, but we were \_\_\_\_\_ by the organisers.
- Rachel lived in Italy for a year, that's how she \_\_\_\_\_ the language.
- Firemen were called to \_\_\_\_\_ a huge fire on George Street last night. Thankfully, no one was hurt.
- I need to get to work as soon as possible, I'm so late! Could you please \_\_\_\_\_ it, driver?
- Diego and Anya were close friends, but they \_\_\_\_\_ last year when they had a big argument about money.

#### Exercise 2:

Match the phrasal verbs in column A with their meaning in column B

A	B
1 - Get over	a) To raise a child until adulthood
2 - Screw up	b) To make sense; to talk about an equalled amount
3 - Look up	c) To extinguish
4 - Brush off	d) To investigate
5 - Drift apart	e) To become very upset because of bad news
6 - Dawn on	f) To misbehave; behave badly or strangely
7 - Put out	g) To disappoint someone
8 - Act up	h) To suddenly understand
9 - Back up	i) To save an extra copy of your work digitally
10 - Bring up	j) To search for something (e.g. in a dictionary)
11 - Let down	l) To start doing something new independently of other people
12 - Break Down	k) To slowly stop being close to someone
13 - Fall out	m) To end a relationship because of an argument
14 - Strike out	n) To recover from something negative
15 - Look into	o) To ignore someone
16 - Add up	p) To do something incorrectly, with a negative effect

#### Exercise 3:

Sentence jumble - Re-arrange the words in these sentences so that they are correct.

- started don't new I've job I , hope a I screw up!  
\_\_\_\_\_
- fell after out last We year an argument.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- It took ex-boyfriend a over year to Jane get her.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- held We got up in morning traffic this.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- The thought the that man's add story officer didn't up.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- I want my own strike out and live to on.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- their The looked word students up in the dictionaries.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Don't brush just like me off that!  
\_\_\_\_\_
- morning Mark's broke down this car.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Could you at 7pm pick up me?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- were 2 weeks engaged, but They Ali broke it off it ago.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- puts work down His boss him at.  
\_\_\_\_\_

13. Elisa's attitude brings negative down me.  
\_\_\_\_\_
14. we're Please don't let down us, on depending you.  
\_\_\_\_\_
15. , put Quick out fire that!  
\_\_\_\_\_
16. After, the 3 years drifted couple had apart.  
\_\_\_\_\_
17. Martha grandparents was up by brought her.  
\_\_\_\_\_
18. you What grow city did up in?  
\_\_\_\_\_
19. I need to the parents drop my off at airport.  
\_\_\_\_\_
20. running on late, We're step it.  
\_\_\_\_\_
21. My phone again acting is up.  
\_\_\_\_\_
22. Remember to your work back on a up CD.  
\_\_\_\_\_
23. dawned me that on I had It forgotten to homework do my.  
\_\_\_\_\_
24. The is company looking the complaint into.  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Answers:

### Exercise 01

1. add up
2. broke down
3. drop off
4. pick up
5. let down
6. picked up
7. put out
8. step on
9. fell out

### Exercise 02

- |       |        |
|-------|--------|
| 1 - n | 9 - i  |
| 2 - p | 10 - a |
| 3 - j | 11 - g |
| 4 - o | 12 - e |
| 5 - k | 13 - m |
| 6 - h | 14 - l |
| 7 - c | 15 - d |
| 8 - f | 16 - b |

### Exercise 03

1. I've started a new job, I hope I don't screw up!
2. We fell out last year after an argument.
3. It took Jane a year to get over her ex-boyfriend.
4. We got held up in traffic this morning.
5. The officer thought that the man's story didn't add up.
6. I want to strike out and live on my own.
7. The students looked the word up in their dictionaries.
8. Don't just brush me off like that!
9. Mark's car broke down this morning.
10. Could you pick me up at 7pm?
11. They were engaged, but Ali broke it off 2 weeks ago.
12. His boss puts him down a lot at work.
13. Elisa's negative attitude bothers me.
14. Please don't let us down, we're depending on you.
15. Quick, put out that fire!
16. After 3 years, the couple had drifted apart.
17. Martha was brought up by her grandparents.
18. What city did you grow up in?





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