

APSU Writing Center
Two-Word Verbs

Two-Word Verbs (Phrasal Verbs)

- Two-word verbs are combined with an adverb or a preposition. Together, they form a single unit of meaning.
- Two-word verbs cannot have the adverb or preposition placed in the wrong position.
 - **Error:** Roland called up her.
 - **Correction:** Roland called her up.
 - **Error:** Misako turned down them.
 - **Correction:** Misako turned them down.

Common Error

- The meaning of a two-word verb cannot always be guessed from the individual words.
 - **Example:** How did you **come by** that picture?
 - **Meaning:** **come by** means to get or to obtain.

Separable Two-Word Verbs (Verb + Adverb)

- The adverb can be separated from the verb.
- **Verb + object + adverb OR Verb + adverb + object**
 - **Before:** The prince turned down the king.
 - **After:** The prince turned the king down.
 - **Meaning:** **turned down** means rejected.

Object is Pronoun

- When the object is a pronoun, separate the verb and adverb.
 - **Error:** We threw away it.
 - **Correct:** We threw it away.

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Common Separable Two-Word Verbs

Verb + Adverb	Meaning	Example with Noun	Example with Pronoun
take apart	disassemble	We took apart the bicycle.	We took it apart.
show around	give a tour	We showed around the visitors.	We showed them around.
throw away	discard	We threw away the boxes.	We threw them away.
put back	replace	We put back the books.	We put them back.
break down	categorize	We broke down the addresses.	We broke them down.
call off	cancel	We called off the meeting.	We called it off.
find out	discover	We found out the truth.	We found it out.
talk over	discuss	We talked over the situation.	We talked it over.
keep together	group	We kept together the papers.	We kept them together.
hang up	disconnect	We hung up the phone.	We hung it up.

Common Adverbs in Separable Verbs

- These almost always signal that the verb is separable:
 - **Examples:** apart, away, down, out, together, around, back, off, over, up

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Inseparable Two-Word Verbs (Verb + Preposition)

- The preposition cannot be separated from the verb.
- **Verb + preposition + object** (noun or pronoun)
 - **Error:** The prince turned the king against.
 - **Correction:** The prince turned against the king.
 - **Meaning:** turned against means became an enemy of.

Prepositional Phrase Movie Test

- If the second word can logically form a prepositional phrase with **the movies**, it is a preposition, not an adverb, so the verb is inseparable.
 - **Separable Example:** Roland called up her.
 - **Test:** up the movies does not work with the adverb so it is separable.
 - **Correction:** Roland called her up.
 - **Inseparable Example:** We stopped at a fast-food restaurant.
 - **Test:** at the movies does work with the preposition so it is inseparable.

In and On in Two-Word Verbs

- Because **in** and **on** can be either adverbs or prepositions, the “movies test” does not always help

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In/On as Adverbs (Separable)

Verb + Adverb	Meaning	Example
turn in	submit	We turned in our papers. → We turned them in.
turn on	activate	We turned on the radio. → We turned it on.

In/On as Prepositions (Inseparable)

Verb + Preposition	Meaning	Example
look into	investigate	The FBI will look into the case.
call on	visit	We called on some friends.



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Reference

Beason, L., & Lester, M. (2015). *A commonsense guide to grammar and usage* (5th ed., pp. 357–365). Bedford/St. Martin's.