

Two Word Verbs

APSU Writing Center Handout

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.

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

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