
You Don't Know From Prepositions

This is the sort of English up with which I will not put.

—ATTRIBUTED TO WINSTON CHURCHILL

Quick! What kind of word is *from*?

Bet you said, “Ha! Everyone knows it’s a preposition. Must be a trap. Better not say preposition.”

We all learned it in grade school: *from* is a preposition. When I sat down to draft this chapter, I didn’t intend to overturn this teaching. I set out to write a brief notice that, yes, despite what some teachers say, sentences can end with prepositions. I ended up unlearning some “facts”—laboriously, by way of research, confusion, and resistance—and expanding my perspective. I came to see that prepositions are not necessarily prepositions and that easy labels—who knew?—can obscure deeper truths.

I invite you to join me. Set aside, for a moment, what you know. Open yourself to a discussion unlike any other in this book: a deep exploration of one aspect of grammar to which few people will ever give much thought. Consider the outrageous notion that we can’t call *from*, by itself, a preposition or anything else. We can’t know what *from* is (we can’t know *from from*) until we see what it does. Same goes for *over*, *of*, *around*, and the hundred other words that we have always thought of, automatically, as prepositions. In fact, a preposition is a preposition only when it *acts* as a preposition, when it creates a certain kind of relationship between other words in a sentence.

This thing that we’ve always called a preposition is a verb particle—not a preposition—when it acts as a verb particle, and it’s an adverb—not a preposition and not a verb particle—when it acts as an adverb.

In this chapter, I hope to leave you with nothing less than the exhilaration of a new way of seeing language. As a bonus, I wrap up with a few guidelines that enable you—within the admittedly narrow realm of this special group of words—to write with more confidence and freedom.

Preposition, Verb Particle, or Adverb?

Let's start with some definitions based on the way these three word types behave.

- A **preposition** typically appears immediately before—in *pre-position* to—a noun phrase. The preposition connects the noun phrase to another word in the sentence. In *The fox leaped into the river*, the preposition *into* connects *the river* back to *leaped*. The prepositional phrase *into the river* modifies the verb *leaped*. (Incidentally, some linguists no longer even count prepositions among English parts of speech. For grammar lovers, this news ranks up there with the deplanetization of Pluto.⁵⁸)
- A **verb particle** combines with a main verb, and sometimes with other particles, to create a multiple-word verb with an idiomatic meaning, a meaning different from that of the individual words. For example, *in* is a verb particle—not a preposition and not an adverb—in *chip in* (help). *Out* is a verb particle in *hand out* (distribute). *Out* and *of* are both verb particles in *drop out of* (quit). *From* is a verb particle in *know from* (understand, have a clue about).
- An **adverb** modifies a verb, an adjective, or another adverb. Adverbs commonly tell when or where or how something happens. In *The couple strolled outside*, the adverb *outside* tells where the couple strolled. Here, *outside* is neither a preposition

58. Pluto comparison courtesy of my grammar-loving sister. The reclassification of traditional parts of speech requires a new vocabulary to which no footnote can do justice. For an introduction to this topic, see “A Modern Take (Is *Take* a Noun?) on Parts of Speech” on page 61. See also the bumper sticker “Honk if Pluto is a planet.”

(it has no object) nor a verb particle (it contributes to no idiomatic meaning).

The authors of *Analyzing English Grammar* summarize the distinctions this way: “prepositions have noun or noun phrase objects; verb particles are essential to the meaning of the verb; and adverbs often can be ... deleted.”⁵⁹

What kind of word is *up* in each of the following sentences?

Jack ran up a huge hill.

Jack ran up a huge bill.

When he got to the hill, Jack ran up, turned around, and ran back down.

Let’s zoom in on these. Brackets indicate the verb.

Jack [ran] **up** a huge hill.

This *up* is a preposition because it connects a noun phrase (*a huge hill*) to another word in the sentence (*ran*).

Jack [ran **up**] a huge bill.

This *up* is a verb particle because it is essential to the meaning of the verb. The words *ran* and *up* function as a unit—as a single verb—with an idiomatic meaning: “incurred.” *Ran* without *up* makes no sense; a person can’t run a huge bill.

When he got to the hill, Jack [ran] **up**, turned around, and ran back down.

59. Thomas P. Klammer, Muriel R. Schulz, and Angela Della Volpe, *Analyzing English Grammar*, 5th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 117–123. I’m grateful to Drs. Klammer, Schulz, and Della Volpe for their feedback on this chapter and on “A Modern Take (Is *Take* a Noun?) on Parts of Speech” on page 61.

This *up* is an adverb because it tells how Jack ran. *Up* has no noun or noun-phrase object, so it can't be a preposition. And *up* is not essential to the meaning of the verb—*ran* still means “ran” without it—so it can't be a verb particle.

Verb Particles and Phrasal Verbs

Verbs that include verb particles—*fight off*, *come up with*, *run out of*—are called phrasal verbs because they are phrases. Even when separated, the main verb and its particle function as a unit. In *Jane took the idea in*, the verb is *took in*.

When I first read the term *verb particle*, I pictured a plastic model of an atom, a few colored balls held together by sticks. The main verb (*chip*, *give*, *drop*) is the nucleus. One or more verb particles (*in*, *out*, *out + of*) are electrons. The whole phrasal verb (*chip in*, *give out*, *drop out of*) is the atom.

The main verb (*chip*, *give*, *drop*) is the nucleus. One or more verb particles (*in*, *out*, *out + of*) are electrons. The whole phrasal verb (*chip in*, *give out*, *drop out of*) is the atom.

English includes thousands of phrasal verbs, each with its own idiomatic meaning. (*Cut it out* has nothing to do with using scissors.) Some phrasal verbs have multiple meanings. (*Check out* could mean “look at,” “go to a cashier,” “exit physically,” or “exit mentally.” *Put on* could mean “don clothes,” “josh a person,” “apply makeup,” or “play recorded music.”) Phrasal verbs can include nouns too; I especially like the oddly perfect *wrap your head around* (understand). The website UsingEnglish.com defines some 2,000 phrasal verbs—a mere sampling—based on 153 main verbs. *Get*, alone, spawns 167 phrasal verbs like these: *get back*, *get ahead of*, *get along with*, *get down*, *get over*.⁶⁰

We use phrasal verbs all the time. They give our language color and make it endearingly flexible. The *New York Times* crossword puzzle

60. “Phrasal Verb Quizzes—By Verb,” *UsingEnglish.com*, last modified June 7, 2012, <http://www.usingenglish.com/reference/phrasal-verbs/quizzes-verbs.html>.

wouldn't be the *New York Times* crossword puzzle without them. Phrasal verbs also make English maddening to learn. One nonnative speaker calls them "English mutant monsters."⁶¹

When Is a Word "Essential to the Meaning of the Verb"?

The quiriness of phrasal verbs can make it tough to tell whether you're looking at a verb particle (essential to the meaning of the verb) or a preposition (not essential to the meaning of the verb), especially when the slippery little word in question precedes a noun. The whole question hangs—hangs, I tell you!—on whether that noun is the object of a preposition or the direct object of a transitive phrasal verb.

Quick review: A transitive verb is a verb that has a direct object; the verb transfers action to a noun (*trans* = "across"). For example, in *The dancer broke in the new shoes*, the phrasal verb *broke in* is a transitive verb, and *shoes* is its direct object (the noun to which it transfers action). Here, *in* is a verb particle. An intransitive verb has no direct object. In *The plate broke into little pieces*, the verb *broke* is intransitive; *pieces* is not a direct object of the verb but an object of the preposition *into*.⁶²

In the following examples, the slippery little word *with* must be either a verb particle or a preposition—the only two grammatical possibilities—but which? Does the verb's meaning require *with*, making *with* a verb particle? Or does the verb's meaning not require *with*, making *with* a preposition?

Go play with those kids.

Don't mess with those kids.

Let's make up with those kids.

The analysis gets tricky.

61. Bonnie Trenga, "Phrasal Verbs," *Grammar Girl* blog, July 4, 2008, <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/phrasal-verbs.aspx>.

62. Some verbs can play either a transitive or an intransitive role. The verb *broke*, for example, is intransitive in *The plate broke into little pieces* (no direct object) and transitive in *The shopper broke the plate* (direct object = *plate*).

Word Up!

Go [play] **with** those kids.

This *with* is not essential to the verb's meaning. Without *with*, *play*—"frolic"—still pertains to the sentence. So *play with* is not an idiom; it's not a phrasal verb; *with* isn't its particle. *With* is a preposition. *Kids* is an object of the preposition. This sentence has no direct object. The verb, an intransitive verb, is simply *play*.

(*Play with* can be idiomatic. Take *Go play with those ideas*. *With* is essential to this verb's meaning. Here, *play with* is an idiom meaning "consider." Without *with*, *play*—"frolic"—no longer pertains to the sentence. So *with* is a verb particle. This sentence has no preposition. *Ideas* is a direct object of the transitive verb *play with*.)

Don't [mess **with**] those kids.

This *with* is essential to the verb's meaning. *Mess with* is an idiom meaning "bother." Without *with*, *mess*—as in "make messy"—no longer pertains to the sentence. So *with* is a verb particle. This sentence has no preposition. *Kids* is a direct object of the transitive verb *mess with*.

Let's [make **up**] **with** those kids.

Here, the verb particle (*up*) butts up against a preposition (*with*). Each needs its own analysis:

- This *up* is essential to the verb's meaning. *Make up* is an idiom meaning "reconcile." Without *up*, *make*—"create" or "force"—no longer pertains to the sentence. So *up* is a verb particle. The verb here is *make up*.
- This *with* is not essential to the verb's meaning. Without *with*, *make up*—"reconcile"—still pertains to the sentence. So *with* is not a verb particle; it's a preposition. *Kids* is an object of the preposition. This sentence has no direct object. The verb is intransitive.

Is this a hoot or what?

The Context Beyond the Sentence

Quick! What kind of word is *along* in this sentence?

Get along, little dogies.

This *along* can't be a preposition because it has no noun object. (The speaker is neither telling someone to "get along the little dogies" nor telling the little dogies to get along something.) So *along* must be either an adverb or a verb particle. But which?

In fact, we can't say. The sentence doesn't tell us enough. We lack context again, as we did in the beginning (What kind of word is *from*?). We need to know what the speaker means before we can classify *along*.

[Get] **along**, little dogies.

If the speaker wants the little dogies to stop dawdling, *along* is not essential to the meaning of the verb. You know this because when you delete *along*, the verb *get*—as in "git"—still pertains to the meaning of the sentence. So *along* is an adverb.

[Get **along**], little dogies.

If the speaker wants the little dogies to stop squabbling, *along* is essential to the meaning of the verb. You know this because when you delete *along*, the verb *get*—as in "git"—no longer pertains to the sentence. *Get along* is idiomatic; it's a phrasal verb meaning "cooperate." So *along* is a verb particle.

A Few Guidelines

Why bother with all this brain-taxing analysis? For me, wrapping my head around this stuff is its own reward. "Getting it" has been a blast. "Getting it" has also brought a few guidelines into focus, clarifying certain decisions. Mostly they're small, but when it comes to writing,

“no decision is too small to be worth wrestling with.”⁶³ Here, then, are those guidelines.

Use Phrasal Verbs on Purpose

When a phrasal verb suggests itself, your first decision is whether to use it. Consider several factors. In their favor, these idiomatic verbs are “natural-sounding” and “lend a relaxed, confident tone,” as Bryan Garner, ahem, points out.⁶⁴ On the other hand, he continues, they increase word count, so “some rhetoricians prefer avoiding them—hence *handle* instead of *deal with*, *resolve* instead of *work out*.”

Also weighing against phrasal verbs, sometimes, is their informality. Bonnie Trenga, the author of *Off-the-Wall Skits with Phrasal Verbs*, gives this example: “If you were writing a dissertation on Henry VIII, you might not want to write, ‘The king hung out with all the nobles.’ It would probably be better to write, ‘The king associated with all the nobles.’ If there’s a doubt, use more formal language.”⁶⁵

A summary of all this wisdom amounts to a counsel of perfection: choose terms—phrasal or not—that convey your meaning precisely and tightly and that hit exactly the right level of diction for every conceivable audience and purpose.

Do I hear a chorus of angels?

Put Spaces Before Verb Particles

Verb particles and their verbs may cozy up to each other to form compound nouns, but in verb form—that is, in phrase form—they need their space.

Nouns: *giveaway*, *hangout*, *shake-up*

Verbs: *give away*, *hang out*, *shake up*

63. William Zinsser, *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), xiii.

64. Garner, *Garner’s Modern American Usage*, 628–629.

65. Trenga, “Phrasal Verbs.”

Put Spaces After Verb Particles

Quick! *Sylvia went onto the stage* or *Sylvia went on to the stage*?

Have you ever wondered when to put a space between *on* and *to*? Between *in* and *to*? Between *up* and *on*? Wonder no more. If you're looking at a verb particle, put a space after it.

After entering the movie theater, Sylvia [went] **onto** the stage.

This *on* (the syllable you pronounce) is not essential to the meaning of the verb. You know this because when you delete *on*, the verb *went*—as in “walked”—still pertains to the meaning of the sentence. So *on* is not a verb particle. It's part of the preposition *onto* (no space after *on*).

After acting in many movies, Sylvia [went **on**] **to** the stage.

This *on* is essential to the meaning of the verb. You know this because when you delete *on*, the verb *went*—as in “walked”—no longer pertains to the meaning of the sentence. *Went on* is idiomatic; it's a phrasal verb meaning “proceeded.” So *on* is a verb particle. It's not part of a preposition. You put a space after it (*on to* not *onto*).

Quick! Does a company's expertise fit into, or fit in to, an online conversation? Hint: Delete *in*. Does *fit* (meaning “be the right size and shape for”) pertain? No. *Fit in*, here, is idiomatic. It means “go together or harmonize.” Expertise *fits in* to a conversation.

Now do you feel clued into, that is, clued in to, the use of spaces?

Avoid Extraneous Verb Particles

Verb particles sometimes crash the party, sneaking in where they don't belong. Instead of *separating* things out, *separate* them. Rather than *focus in* on something, *focus* on it. Don't *weigh up* your priorities; *weigh* them. When in doubt about a verb, research it out. I mean, research it. Dictionaries cover thousands of phrasal verbs. Some dictionaries cover nothing but phrasal verbs.

Stay Dialed, Dude

Fashionable phrasal verbs often absorb their particles. If you use slang in your writing, despite the risks,⁶⁶ stay alert to changes. Once upon a time, we were *bumped out*; these days, we're *bumped*. Back in the day, you'd challenge your rivals to *bring it on*; today, you say *bring it*. Hipsters don't *deal with* problems; they *deal*. They don't get *psyched up*; they get *psyched*. They don't *walk out on* people; they *walk*. When Trailblazer LaMarcus Aldridge "twines eight in a row from twelve feet,"⁶⁷ he is not *dialed in*; the man is *dialed*.

End a Sentence with a Preposition If You Need To

The so-called rule against ending a sentence with a preposition has been called a "durable superstition,"⁶⁸ a "remnant of Latin grammar,"⁶⁹ an "artificial 'rule,'"⁷⁰ and "one of the top ten grammar myths."⁷¹ One editor reports having seen many a "tangled sentence due to reluctance to end a sentence with a preposition."⁷² That kind of tangled sentence is exactly what some anonymous scribbler back in Churchill's day was railing against when he or she penned the variously cited, often misinterpreted quip ending so magnificently in "up with which I will not put."⁷³

66. Some style guides advise avoiding slang altogether, but you might want to use it if it suits your audience and purpose. Consider whether the advantages of immediacy and color outweigh the risks of alienating some readers and sacrificing the long-term relevance of your writing. When you nail it, slang, like other "ephemeragy," is "one of the most stimulating devices in the writer's toolbox" (Plotnik, *Spunk & Bite*, 234–235).

67. Example courtesy of my husband, whose encouragement and editorial suggestions have helped shape this whole chapter (not to mention the whole book).

68. Johnson, *The Handbook of Good English*, 386.

69. Garner, *Garner's Modern American Usage*, 654.

70. Paul Brians, *Common Errors in English Usage* (Wilsonville, OR: William, James & Co., 2003), 73.

71. Mignon Fogarty, "Ending a Sentence with a Preposition," *Grammar Girl* blog, March 31, 2011, <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/ending-prepositions.aspx>.

72. Shauna Roberts, "Phrasal Verbs: Cool, but Often Misused," *Shauna Roberts' For Love of Words* blog, March 26, 2008, <http://shaunaroberts.blogspot.com/2008/03/phrasal-verbs-cool-but-often-misused.html>.

73. Some researchers question the Churchill attribution. The source usually cited, an anecdote in Sir Ernest Gowers's *Plain Words* (1948), rests on mere hearsay: "It is said that Mr. Winston Churchill once made this marginal comment" (emphasis mine). For

I add my voice to the choir in making, finally, the point that I originally set out to make. Feel free to end a sentence with a preposition—but only if you can't find a better word to end it with.

Now You Know From Prepositions—So What?

What does it matter that you now know from prepositions?

Who's going to notice when you confidently put a space between *on* and *to*, or when you freely place *with* wherever you please? Who will appreciate that you've seen through the label "preposition" to deeper linguistic truths? What critic will ever be impressed by such private indicators of your growing mastery over your craft?

One editor reports having seen many a "tangled sentence due to reluctance to end a sentence with a preposition."

Answer: The only critic with the power to hold you back.

more on the debunking of this probably false Churchillism, see Benjamin G. Zimmer, "A Misattribution No Longer To Be Put Up With," *Language Log* blog, December 12, 2004, <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001715.html>. See also Paul Brians, "'Churchill' on Prepositions," accessed May 14, 2012, <http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/churchill.html>.