The use of english phrasal verbs in formal and informal communication

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Abstract: English phrasal verbs are an essential part of everyday communication and play an important role in both spoken and written English. A phrasal verb is generally formed by combining a verb with an adverbial particle or a particle and preposition, creating a unit whose meaning may be literal, figurative, or idiomatic. The use of phrasal verbs differs significantly according to communicative situation, audience, genre, and level of formality. In informal communication, phrasal verbs such as *find out, get up, put off,* and *come back* are extremely common and contribute to the naturalness and fluency of speech. In formal communication, however, speakers and writers may prefer Latinate or single-word alternatives such as *discover, postpone,* and *return*. Nevertheless, phrasal verbs should not be considered exclusively informal because many are widely used in academic, professional, administrative, and scientific contexts. This paper examines the use of English phrasal verbs in formal and informal communication, focusing on differences in frequency, register, meaning, grammatical behavior, and stylistic function. It also considers the importance of context in choosing between phrasal verbs and their one-word equivalents. The analysis demonstrates that effective English communication requires not only knowledge of phrasal verbs but also an understanding of their stylistic and pragmatic appropriateness. Awareness of register enables learners to select expressions that are suitable for particular communicative situations and helps them achieve greater accuracy, fluency, and flexibility in English.

Keywords: English phrasal verbs; formal communication; informal communication; register; language style; academic English; spoken English; vocabulary; communication; phrasal verb usage.

Phrasal verbs are one of the most characteristic features of the English vocabulary. They occur frequently in conversations, interviews, newspapers, literature, business correspondence, academic writing, and electronic communication. Expressions such as *find out, look after, carry out, bring up, take over,* and *give up* demonstrate how a verb combined with a particle can create a new lexical and semantic unit. Because phrasal verbs are so common, their appropriate use is an important element of communicative competence in English. One of the most interesting aspects of phrasal verbs is their relationship with language register. Register refers to the way language varies according to the social situation, purpose, audience, and degree of formality. English speakers do not necessarily use the same vocabulary when talking to close friends as they do when writing a formal business letter or academic paper. Phrasal verbs are particularly relevant to this distinction because many of them are strongly associated with everyday spoken English, while their one-word equivalents may sound more formal. For example, *find out* is frequently used in conversation, whereas *discover* may be more appropriate in a formal written context. Similarly, *put off* can often be replaced by *postpone*, and *bring up* can sometimes be replaced by *raise*.

However, it would be inaccurate to conclude that phrasal verbs belong exclusively to informal English. Many phrasal verbs are common in formal contexts and appear naturally in professional and academic communication. Expressions such as *carry out research, point out a problem, set up an experiment,* and *deal with an issue* are widely accepted in formal writing. Therefore, the distinction between formal and informal communication depends on the individual phrasal verb and its context rather than on the category of phrasal verbs as a whole. The purpose of this paper is to examine how English phrasal verbs function in formal and informal communication. It focuses on their frequency, stylistic characteristics, semantic differences, and practical use in different communicative situations.

The paper also discusses common alternatives to phrasal verbs and explains why understanding register is essential for effective English communication.

Language register determines the vocabulary, grammatical structures, and expressions considered appropriate in a particular situation. English has several broad registers, including informal, neutral, formal, academic, professional, and technical styles. Phrasal verbs can occur in all these registers, although their frequency and distribution vary.[1] In informal communication, phrasal verbs are particularly common. Native speakers frequently use expressions such as *hang out, get up, come over, go on, find out,* and *pick up*. For example: "I'll find out what happened." This sentence sounds natural in ordinary conversation. A more formal alternative would be: "I will determine what happened." The second version is grammatically correct but sounds considerably more formal and less conversational.

This difference illustrates an important characteristic of English vocabulary: phrasal verbs often have single-word synonyms with different stylistic associations. Learners therefore need to understand not only what an expression means but also where and when it is appropriate.

Phrasal verbs are particularly productive in spoken English because they are short, familiar, and flexible. Informal conversations between friends, family members, and colleagues contain numerous examples.

Consider the following expressions:

- *hang out* — spend time socially;
- *come over* — visit someone;
- *find out* — discover information;
- *get up* — rise from bed or a seated position;
- *give up* — stop doing something;
- *look after* — take care of someone or something;
- *put off* — delay something.

These expressions often sound more natural in conversation than their formal equivalents. For example, a speaker would normally say, "Can you look after my dog?" rather than "Can you take care of my dog?" Both are possible, but *look after* is highly natural in everyday British English. Phrasal verbs also contribute to interpersonal communication. Because they are frequently used in ordinary speech, they can make a speaker's language sound familiar and conversational. Their use can therefore help establish an informal relationship between participants.[3]

Although phrasal verbs are associated strongly with informal speech, they are also common in formal contexts. The important factor is the particular phrasal verb.

For example, expressions such as *carry out, point out, deal with, set up,* and *refer to* can occur naturally in professional and academic contexts:

"The researchers carried out a detailed analysis."

"The report points out several significant problems."

"The organization has set up a new committee."

In such examples, replacing the phrasal verbs with single-word alternatives may not necessarily make the writing better. *Carry out* is a standard expression in academic and scientific English, and *point out* is widely accepted in formal writing.

Some phrasal verbs, however, are generally avoided in highly formal academic prose when a precise formal synonym is available. For instance, *find out* may be replaced by *determine*, *look into* by *investigate*, and *put off* by *postpone*. Therefore, formal writing does not require the complete avoidance of phrasal verbs. Instead, writers should select expressions according to context, discipline, audience, and purpose.[4]

A useful way to understand register is to compare common phrasal verbs with their more formal alternatives.

Informal/Common Phrasal Verb	**More Formal Alternative**
find out	discover / determine
put off	postpone
look into	investigate
bring up	raise
go on	continue
get rid of	eliminate
deal with	address / manage
set up	establish
carry out	conduct / perform
point out	indicate / demonstrate

These pairs are not always perfect synonyms. Their meanings can differ slightly depending on context. Nevertheless, they demonstrate how English provides speakers with multiple lexical choices for expressing similar concepts. The choice between a phrasal verb and a single-word alternative should therefore be based on communicative purpose. In a conversation, *We need to find out what happened* sounds natural. In a formal report, *The purpose of the investigation was to determine what happened* may be stylistically more appropriate.

English phrasal verbs constitute an important part of effective communication because they occur extensively across different varieties and registers of English. Their role is especially visible in informal spoken communication, where expressions such as *find out, get up, come over, hang out,* and *give up* are natural and frequent. These expressions contribute to the conversational character of English and allow speakers to communicate ideas in a concise and familiar way. However, the relationship between phrasal verbs and informality is more complex than it may initially appear. It would be incorrect to classify all phrasal verbs as informal and unsuitable for formal writing. Many phrasal verbs are completely acceptable in academic, professional, scientific, and administrative communication. Expressions such as *carry out, point out, deal with, set up,* and *refer to* are frequently found in formal texts. Their use demonstrates that phrasal verbs form a broad lexical category with different stylistic levels.

The major difference between formal and informal communication lies in the selection of individual phrasal verbs and the context in which they are used. Some phrasal verbs have strongly conversational associations, while others are stylistically neutral or appropriate for formal communication. For example, *hang out* is strongly informal, whereas *carry out* can be comfortably used in academic writing. Consequently, speakers and writers need to evaluate the register of individual expressions rather than applying a general rule to all phrasal verbs. The existence of formal single-word alternatives is another important feature of English vocabulary. Expressions such as *find out/discover, put off/postpone, look into/investigate,* and *bring up/raise* illustrate how English provides different lexical choices for similar meanings. These alternatives allow speakers and writers to adapt their language to different audiences and situations. A conversation may favor a familiar phrasal verb, whereas a formal report may favor a Latinate or technical equivalent. For English language learners, register awareness is therefore as important as knowledge of meaning and grammar. A learner who understands the meaning of *put off* but uses it in every context may communicate successfully but fail to achieve an appropriate academic or professional style. Similarly, a learner who avoids all phrasal verbs may produce grammatically accurate English but have difficulty understanding authentic conversations.

The most effective approach is to teach phrasal verbs according to meaning, grammatical structure, frequency, and register. Learners should encounter them in realistic contexts and compare them with appropriate formal and informal alternatives. This approach develops both receptive and productive language skills.

In conclusion, phrasal verbs are indispensable to English communication and cannot simply be divided into “informal” and “formal” categories. Their appropriateness depends on the individual expression, communicative situation, audience, and purpose. A strong command of English therefore requires learners to understand not only what phrasal verbs mean but also how their stylistic characteristics influence communication. Mastering this distinction enables speakers and writers to communicate more naturally, accurately, and appropriately across a wide range of formal and informal situations.

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