

TWO-WORD VERBS

A Study in Idiomatic
English



by

CHARLES N.
STAUBACH

TWO-WORD VERBS

A Study in Idiomatic English

by

CHARLES N. STAUBACH

Assistant Professor of Spanish University of Michigan
Profesor Invitado de Inglés Universidad Nacional y
Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá.

SORTEO
DEL



Publicación del Centro Colombo-Americanoo.
Bogotá, 1945.

INTRODUCTION

To the foreigner learning English the phenomenon known as the "two-word verb" is as vexatious as any our hybrid language can offer. Not only is there the seemingly endless vocabulary problem—a problem made vastly more difficult by the failure of even the best dictionaries to list two-word verbs in general. There are several other factors which puzzle and distress the learner: when is a preposition a preposition, and when is it merely a part of the verb? When does a verb retain its original meaning, and when is the meaning something new and idiomatic? If there is an object, where does it go?

No wonder the poor foreigner, when asked to "put on his coat," says, "I have put on it already." How is he to be blamed, after learning that we "bring a child up," when he smilingly offers to "bring the rear up" in a procession? If we "turn the lights on," why doesn't a dog "turn his persecutor on"? His bafflement is complete when, knowing traffic conditions in an American city and how often cars "run over people," a friend offers to "run him over" in his car.

This booklet is an attempt to study the problem of the two-word verb for the benefit of more advanced students of the English language. It is hoped that the classifications the author has attempted to establish, the examples and exercises, and the fairly long list of representative two-word verbs will help not only such advanced students, but also teachers who may wish to derive from it a shorter and simplified presentation for the use of more elementary students.

Many of the examples and excercises of Part II have been adapted from the study of two-word verbs developed by the research staff of the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan, to be found in their mimeographed publication, **AN INTENSIVE COURSE IN ENGLISH FOR LATIN-AMERICAN STUDENTS**, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1943, Vol. IV. Numerous

examples were provided by the unpublished paper of Miss Audrey Wright of the staff of the Centro Colombo-American, which was prepared under the direction of Dr. Charles C. Fries, Director of the above named English Language Institute and of its research staff. Other examples were found in mimeographed example sheets prepared by Dr. Clifford H. Prator, former Director of the Centro Colombo-American. The author of the present booklet gratefully expresses his debt to these sources, and assumes full responsibility for whatever shortcoming his reshaping and considerable expansion of the subject may have.

C. N. S.

Bogotá, 1945.

I. DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION

1. Definition. For the purposes of the present discussion, a two-word verb is one in which a "function word", used after a common verb, emphasizes or changes the meaning of the verb in such a way that the two words together constitute a new meaning unit.

- a. This tendency is not unlike the use of prefixes in words of Latin origin:

exclaim, call out
repress, hold in
indicate, point out
abstain, hold off

English has many two-word verbs that have no equivalent in Latin and constantly creates new ones, some of which find their way from popular speech into the informal speech of all classes.

- b. The "function word" is usually one which is also used as an adverb or preposition. The most common of these words are **up**, **down**, **on**, **off**, **in**, **out**, **through**, **around**, **to**, **away**, **over**, **back**, **together**, **across**, **along**, **by**, **like**, **with**.

Often the original directional meaning of the function word, or at least a remnant of it, may still be felt in the two-word verb; but the function word gives such a variety of subtle changes in the original meaning of the verb that it is hardly worth while to attempt any classification on the basis of the meaning of the function word.

- c. We exclude from the definition combinations of a verb and a function word when the meaning of the expression is clearly the sum of the two parts; e. g.:
- come (go, walk, etc.) in, out, up, down, etc.
bring (take, etc.) something in, out, etc.

- d. It must be noted that many expressions may have literal meaning, as in c., and also "two-word" or **idiomatic** meaning:

Run across the street (literal meaning).

Run across someone (meet by chance, a two-word verb).

- e. There are "border-line cases" in which it is difficult to say whether the function word modifies the meaning of the verb enough to constitute a two-word verb.

2. Description. The two-word verbs have several complications of construction and word order which add to the learner's problem of mastering idiomatic meanings.

- a. Two-word verbs may be **separable** (transitive) or **inseparable** (intransitive):

I'll call you up at noon.

I'll call up at noon.

There is frequently a marked difference of meaning between the separable and the inseparable use of a verb:

Pass something on: give something to another person.

Pass on: die.

- b. The function word may be **adverbial** (merely a part of the verb-idea) or it may be **prepositional** (followed by an object):

get in: enter (of an automobile)

get in the car: enter the automobile.

There is often a marked difference of meaning between an adverbial and a prepositional use:

hold (something) over: keep beyond the date originally planned

hold (something) over (someone): use as a threat

come across: pay

come across someone: meet by chance

- c. Separable two-word verbs usually have an optional word order:

fill a form out

fill out a form

fill it out

1. A noun object may follow the function word, but it is felt as object of the verb, and **not of the function word**, which

is **adverbial**. In most expressions this is the more usual position for noun objects, especially if the noun is modified.

- 2. A noun object may separate the verb, especially if it is an unqualified noun,
- 3. A **pronoun** object always separates a transitive or separable two-word verb.

- d. Intransitive two-word verbs with prepositional function words are never separated by any object:

see about something: attend to, arrange something

care for someone: love someone; take care of someone

look after something: take care of something.

- e. Some transitive two-word verbs are always separated because a sharp change of meaning occurs in a corresponding intransitive, prepositional verb:

pass something on: give something to another person

pass on something: decide for or against something

get something over: finish, bring to an end

get over something: recover from something

see something through: carry to a conclusion

see through something: penetrate; understand (especially of a puzzle or a sham).

- f. Sometimes a second function word is used. The second function word may serve merely as a preposition with its usual meaning:

keep up: maintain a pace or appearance

keep up with someone: maintain a pace equal to that of another person

In some expressions the second function word is an integral part of the idea:

come up to expectations: fulfill expectations

go back on a promise: fail to fulfill a promise

Very rarely, the second function word may be without prepositional force, as in the expression:

Let's get this job **over with**.

It should be noted that there are both separable (transitive) and inseparable (intransitive) verbs with two function words:
take something up with someone: discuss something with
take up with someone: become friendly with

- g. A few two-word verbs occur most commonly in the past participle form:

to be **cut up** by a sad event: distressed
 put out by a slight: offended
 uncalled for: unnecessary, inappropriate
 run down: in weakened physical condition
 played out: run down
 stuck up: conceited
 stuck up: covered with a sticky substance
 wound up: at a high nervous pitch
 keyed up: wound up
 to have **played out**: dwindled away
 to feel **called upon**: forced by circumstances

- h. A number of two-word verbs have become crystallized into nouns. The majority are hyphenated, and nearly all are of quite colloquial use. A representative list:

blow-out: sudden break in a tire; wild or lavish party
blow-up: sudden fit of anger
brush-off: getting rid of someone in an inconsiderate way
come-down: change for the worse in fortunes
cut-up: funny person, clown
cut-off: short route
falling-out: disagreement
get-up: costume
give-away: obvious pretence
go-between: one who acts to bring two parties together
going-over: scolding
hold-up: robbery
hold-over: something kept longer than originally planned
look-out: observation post; observer, watchman
make-up: in printing, the arrangement of a page; application of cosmetics
mix-up: misunderstanding, confusion
pick-up: a small truck
run-in: dispute
run-around: experience of being misled by false promises

show-off: one who exhibits his accomplishments unnecessarily
show-down: decisive encounter
shut-down: halt in operations
stand-by: always dependable help
stand-in: substitute; influence
stand-off: tie, even encounter
take-off: departure of an airplane; mimicry
turn-over: rate of sale of a stock of merchandise; frequent change among employees
turn-out: attendance

Such expressions are frequently even more elliptical or synthetic than the two-word verbs from which they derive; they often give a special color to the expression of an idea.

3. **Conclusion.** Only extended practice and observation can give assurance and ease in the use of these verbs, but some attention to the classification and observations given above will doubtless help the learner. To summarize the classification:

1. Transitive (separable) verbs; function word may be
 - a. adverbial
 - b. prepositional (including two function words)
2. Intransitive (inseparable) verbs; function word may be
 - a. adverbial
 - b. prepositional (including two function words)

II. EXAMPLES AND EXERCISES

A. Examples to illustrate the difference between **literal** meanings of the function words and **two-word** (idiomatic) meanings:

1. We **called up** the stairs, "Come down, Mary, you have guests."
2. We **called up** a friend and invited him to come to see us.
3. We went to the stairs and **called up**.
4. We **called up**, but no one answered the telephone.
5. He **went over** the highest mountain in the range.
6. The professor **went over** John's examination paper in class.
7. Mary **rán through** the living room and into the kitchen.
8. Mary **ran through** the book and decided to buy it.
9. Louise **ran into** the kitchen.
10. Mary **ran into** an old friend while she was in New York.

B. A few more common two-word verbs:

1. We began to eat at eight o'clock, and we didn't **get through** until nine-thirty.
2. **Look out!** Here comes a car! Always **look out** for cars in the street.
3. Won't you **come over** this evening? Come at about eight o'clock.
4. How did it **come about** that you are in New York this year?
5. The enemy **gave in** after three days of fighting.
6. We insisted on John's coming until he **gave in** and came.
7. He walked and walked until his legs **gave out** and he had to stop.
8. Do you and John get along? Yes, I get along with John very well.
9. He couldn't **put up with** the noise that the children were making, so he moved into another room.

10. He **took to** Mary at once, and soon asked her to marry him.
11. Mrs. Appleton **ran on** for ten minutes without saying anything important.

Exercise

Several verbs are given in bold letters in the following paragraph. Can you replace them with appropriate two-word verbs?

Frank had been working hard at the office, but he hoped to finish before six o'clock. His friends, the Bartons, had invited him to visit for the evening. At first, he had told them that he couldn't come, but he had finally **consented** when they said that Professor Johnson would be there. Frank **telephoned** the Bartons to say he would arrive a little late, but he came in a few minutes after eight. Professor Johnson **liked** Frank immediately, and they had a very pleasant evening discussing the political situation and the war. During the conversation, Professor Johnson said that he couldn't **tolerate** the unfairness of the people who were trying to avoid government restrictions on food and war materials. The reason that the restrictions **happened**, he said, was that each person wanted everything for himself.

"I can't maintain a friendly relationship with that kind of person," Frank said. "I always want to tell him my opinion of him. My patience **becomes exhausted** and I get angry."

At midnight, Professor Johnson said, "I really must go now. I have talked much too long about the subjects that interest me."

C. All the two-word verbs given in A. and B. are intransitive (inseparable) verbs. Here are a few more, and an exercise.

get over (something): recover from

go over: succeed

get by: be good enough, barely acceptable

go on with (something): continue

call on (someone): ask

call on (someone): visit

go back on a promise: fail to keep a promise

call for (something): require

call for (someone): meet in order to go some place

see about (something): attend to, do what is necessary

look after (something): take care of

get on: succeed (in doing something)

Exercise

Replace the verbs in bold letters with two-word verbs from the above list:

Elizabeth was just **recovering from** a cold so that she didn't want to take a long walk, but she had told Robert that she would go and she didn't want to **fail to keep** her promise. She had to decide what dress to wear. "I think that my old blue one will **be good enough**," she thought. "I will wear a coat over it and no one will notice it."

During their walk, they talked about the play that was presented in the university theater. Robert said, "The actors didn't seem to me to be very good, and the dialog wasn't natural. I didn't think the play **succeeded** very well."

"I agree with you," Elizabeth replied. "A good play **requires** good actors. Were you able to **attend** to getting tickets for next week's play?"

"Not yet," said Robert. "How are you **succeeding** with your piano lessons, Elizabeth?"

"Very well, but I don't have much time to practice. You see, I have to **take care of** my little sister every afternoon."

D. The following are a few common transitive (separable) two-word verbs:

1. He **put on** his heavy coat.
He **put** his heavy coat **on**.
He **put it on**.
2. He **thought over** his decision. (considered)
3. The candidate **brought up** several projects for consideration. (introduced)
4. Did you **take back** the books that you borrowed? (return)
5. The man had to **take back** what he had said. (retract)
6. In addition to his teaching, Mr. Barton **took on** some war work. (undertook)
7. She **made over** the green dress that she had bought the year before. (altered)
8. Did she **put away** the dishes after washing them? (set in their usual place)
9. Mr. Green **ran up** a large telephone bill. (accumulated)

10. Mrs. Appleton **called down** the servant for breaking the plates. (reprimanded)

Exercise

Express each of the above sentences in three ways, as in the first one. Do any of them seem better when **not** separated by the noun object? Why? (See section 2c. in Part I).

Replace the verbs in bold letters with two-word verbs:

Mary **dressed herself** in her new yellow coat. "Shall I keep it or shall I **return it**?" she asked. "Mother thinks I should have **altered** the coat that I wore last year. She said I am **accumulating** a large bill at the department store."

"You should **consider** carefully what you want to buy before you buy it," I answered. "Is the coat very expensive?"

"Yes, it is," Mary answered, "and Mother says it isn't a very good idea to **accept** more financial obligations than Father can pay for."

"That's right," I said. "Perhaps you had better **return the coat**."

"Oh, dear! I was afraid you would **reprimand** me!"

E. More common separable two-word verbs:

1. He **thought out** the problem by hard study. (solved)
2. We **put off** our visit to the city until the weather was cooler. (deferred)
3. The committee **took up** the problem of flood control. (began to consider)
4. They **took up** their work where they had left it. (resumed)
5. Mrs. Barton **brought up** her children to speak three languages. (raised, educated)
6. The firemen **put out** the fire. (extinguished)
7. I **took over** Mr. Jones' job after he went to the army. (assumed the responsibility of)
8. I **looked up** that word in the dictionary. (searched for)
9. Look **up** the Smiths when you are in Chicago. (go to see)
10. She **looked over** the new dresses while he **looked** the pretty sales-girls **over**. (examined)
11. He **brought out** a book on American political parties. (published)
12. The speaker **brought out** an important point. (emphasized)

Notice carefully those verbs which have more than one meaning. What is the difference between **bring** (someone) **up** and bring (something) **up**?

Express each of the above sentences with separated order, and with pronoun objects.

F. Examples of difference of meaning between transitive and intransitive uses:

1. When did you **get** your suit **back** from the cleaners? (receive the return of)
At what time did you **get back**? (return)
2. They **gave** the prisoner **up** without an argument. (surrendered)
It was too hot to play tennis, and John **gave up** after a few minutes. (stopped trying)
3. He **made out** a registration blank. (filled)
How are you **making out** in English? (progressing)
4. They **got** some of their old clothes **together** and went on a canoe trip. (collected)
Let's **get together** for lunch some time. (meet)
5. Can you **make up** the lessons that you missed? (compensate for)
The children **made up** after the quarrel. (became reconciled)

In which of the above sentences is there optional word order?

In which ones does the verb have no object?

Exercise

Complete the two-word verbs in the following sentences.

Repeat the sentences, using pronouns instead of the noun objects.

1. John was in the bookstore, looking — the new books.
2. Are you going to look — John Black when you are in New York?
3. Mrs. Barton brings — her children very strictly.
4. Neither candidate brought — very important issues in the campaign.

5. John put — his oldest hat because it was a rainy day.
6. Look — — that dog; he may bite you.
7. Will you have time to see — ordering some meat?
8. There was no water to put — the fire with.
9. They called — John yesterday to tell him the good news.
10. Last week I ran — an old friend of mine.
11. Did you take — the book to the library?
12. He is an unpleasant man; he doesn't get — — his neighbors.
13. He is going to bring — a book about politics in Europe.
14. Did you get — the dishes that they borrowed from you?
15. The governor brought — the importance of voting.
16. Mrs. Barton thought — each candidate carefully before voting.
17. Mrs. Green made — Mr. Green's suits for their son.
18. He always puts — reading the editorials until after he has looked at the cartoons.
19. Mr. Brown took — the job of editor after Mr. Green left.
20. Have you just got — a bad cold?

Use the following two-word verbs correctly in sentences:

make out	give up
make (something) out	give (someone, something) up
make up	get together
make (something) up	get (something) together

G. More examples of difference of meaning between transitive and intransitive uses:

get (something) on: get dressed

get (something) off: remove

get (something) in: bring in

get (something) over: finish

see (someone) through: help to the end of a task, illness, etc.

see (something) through finish

get on (something): mount

get off (something): descend from

get in (something): enter

get over (something): recover from

see through (someone): understand someone's hidden motives

see through (something): understand

- turn (something) on:** cause to operate
turn (something) off: cause to stop operating

- turn on (someone):** turn and attack
turn on (something): depend on
turn off (the road): leave

Note that in these instances the first column contains transitive verbs with adverbial function words, and the second column, intransitive verbs with prepositional function words. Some of the transitive verbs allow either order; context prevents confusion with the intransitive verb of different meaning:

- Get on a hat. Get it on.**
Get off your coat. Get it off.
Turn on the radio. Turn it on.

- Get on a horse. Get on it.**
Get off the table. Get off it.
He turned on his pursuer. He turned on him.

The expressions **see (someone, something) through** and **get (something) over** are always separated. Only by word order can we tell the difference between:

- See the plan through.**
I'll see the fugitive through.
Let's get the party over.

- See through the plan.**
I'll see through the fugitive.
I hope to get over the party.

Exercise

Construct sentences that contain these two-word verbs.

H. Examples of verbs whose meaning differs according to the adverbial or prepositional value of the function word.

come by: arrive or pass casually

get off: depart

run over: descend

pass on: die

come by (something): receive, acquire

get off (something): descend from

run over (someone): hit with a car

pass on (something): approve or disapprove
 (remember "pass (something) on")

come across: pay (slang)
hold something over: -?-.

stick through: penetrate

come across (someone): meet
hold (something) over (someone) -?-.
stick through (something): remain until the end.

Exercise

Construct sentences illustrating the difference between the two-word verbs of these two groups.

I. Exercise: Look up the verb **blow** in the alphabetical list, Part III. Then study these examples in use:

1. The powder magazine blew up. 2. The professor blew up when I didn't know the answer. 3. The captain said a storm was blowing up. 4. The boys blew the foot-ball up. 5. Let the old man blow off; he'll calm down later. 6. What time did you blow in last night? 7. I blew the lamp out and went to bed. 8. As we rounded the turn a tire blew out. 9. I am sure their quarrel will blow over. 10. The threatening storm blew over.

Express each of the above sentences in other words.

Express the verbs in bold letters with two-word verbs:

The ship exploded; the enemy destroyed it by explosion. The survivors inflated rubber life-rafts. Unfortunately a violent storm was approaching. The captain angrily reprimanded the occupants of one raft for moving away from the others. "Say together," he said. "I think the storm will pass without doing harm."

J. Exercise: Look up the verb **break** in the alphabetical list, Part III. Then fill the blanks in the following sentences with the right function word:

1. My new shoes hurt my feet; I haven't broken them — yet.
2. John and his sweetheart had a quarrel, and decided to break —.
3. I can't break — his fear of the dark.
4. Thieves broke — last night.

5. I blew — when I learned the police had caught them but allowed them to break —.
6. I knew James had measles (sarampión) when he broke —.
7. We have a new man in our office. The chief asked me to break him —.

Study these examples of **break** in use. Pick out the **separable** two-word verbs, and express them in different order.

1. At what time did the party break up? 2. I am sorry to hear that Mr. and Mrs. X. have broken up. 3. In the Michigan lakes the ice breaks up in March or April. 4. The police broke the game of dice up. 5. He took a hammer and broke up the ice for cocktails. 6. What happened to the Smiths? I am sorry about their break-up. 7. Ships begin traveling the river after the spring break up. 8. During our trip the car broke down; we waited hours for assistance. 9. After hours of questioning the prisoner broke down and confessed. 10. Mr. Jones worked too hard and suffered a nervous break-down. 11. The police broke down the prisoner's resistance, after they had broken his alibi down. 12. The orator broke off suddenly and stared at the back of the hall. 13. Jim and his girl friend broke off a week or so ago. 14. Thieves broke in and stole everything of value. 15. They broke in our house and another one too. 16. They broke a window in. 17. New shoes are uncomfortable until they are broken in. 18. We are going to break a new maid in next week. 19. Five prisoners broke out during the jail-break last week. 20. They broke out of the older section. 21. He broke out in a series of exclamations. "I won't go," he broke out, "I won't go." 22. The patient had broken out in a rash. "When did he break out," asked the doctor. 23. The prisoner broke away from his captor, and ran. 24. "I'm enjoying the party, but we really must break away." 25. When the little girl's doll was broken, she broke into tears.

K. Exercise: Study **bring** in the alphabetical list. Then replace the words in bold letters with appropriate two-word verbs:

I don't like to mention the subject, but I wonder where Brown will end. His parents raised him to be a good man, but he drinks so much he will surely cause serious trouble to befall his family. When they introduced his sister to society he mis-behaved badly. I must admit he was very funny; he successfully accomplished his im-

tation of an aviator destroying an enemy plane, and won wild applause; but then he passed out and his friends had a hard time reviving him. Someone just published a book on curing alcoholism. He ought to read it. And just think, his excesses caused pneumonia last year, and the doctors barely saved him.

III. A REPRESENTATIVE LIST OF TWO-WORD-VERBS

The arrangement of this list is as follows: **separable** (transitive) verbs are in the left-hand column; **inseparable** (intransitive) verbs, in the right-hand column. Expressions in which the function word is prepositional, and hence has a complement, are slightly indented.

The indication (1) means that the transitive verb so marked is usually or always separated.

Separable	Inseparable
Adverbial	Adverbial
Prepositional	Prepositional
	be up: in good health or spirits: out of bed
	be up to (someone): be someone's responsibility
	be up for (office): be a candidate
	be up for (consideration): be a subject for consideration
	be down: be in bad health or spirits
	be down on (someone): be angry with
	be out: be away from home