

Lesson Plan: Phrasal verbs with multiple meanings

Level: Advanced (C1–C2)

Time: 60–90 minutes

Skills: Grammar, speaking, reading, writing

Focus: Meaning shifts, abstract vs literal use, formality, ambiguity

Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify multiple meanings of common phrasal verbs
- Infer meaning from context accurately
- Choose appropriate meanings based on register and genre
- Use polysemous phrasal verbs naturally in speech and writing

Target Language (core phrasal verbs)

1. Take off

- Remove (clothing)
- Become successful (*The product really took off*)
- Leave the ground (planes)

2. Break down

- Stop functioning (*The car broke down*)
- Become emotionally upset
- Analyze (*Let's break it down*)

3. Carry out

- Perform / execute (*carry out a study*)
- Fulfill (duties, instructions)

4. Set up

- Arrange / organize
- Establish (a business, system)
- Trick (*You set me up!*)

5. Run out (of)

- Have none left
- Expire (*time ran out*)

Lesson Procedure

1. Warm-up: meaning prediction (10 minutes)

Write sentences on the board using the **same phrasal verb** in different contexts.

Example (*break down*):

1. *The negotiations broke down after two hours.*
2. *She broke down when she heard the news.*
3. *Let's break the problem down step by step.*

Task:

Students work in pairs to:

- Identify different meanings
- Rank them from **most literal** → **most abstract**

Aim:

Raise awareness that **phrasal verbs are flexible and context-driven**.

2. Guided discovery: context & register (15 minutes)

Provide a short text (news article, academic abstract, or business report).

Example excerpt:

The committee carried out a comprehensive review after the system broke down.

Tasks:

- Underline phrasal verbs
- Identify:
 - Meaning in context
 - Register (formal / neutral / informal)
- Discuss why a one-word verb might or might not work instead

3. Meaning & nuance focus (15 minutes)

Create a comparison table:

Phrasal Verb	Meaning	Near-synonym	Register
carry out	conduct	execute	formal
set up	establish	found	neutral
break down	analyze	examine	neutral

Discussion Focus:

- Why *carry out* is preferred in academic writing
- When phrasal verbs sound **more natural** than Latinate verbs

4. Controlled practice (10–15 minutes)

Task A: Meaning matching

Match sentences to meanings.

Example (*take off*):

- Remove clothing
- Become successful
- Depart

Task B: Sentence transformation

Replace the underlined word with a phrasal verb (same meaning).

*The company **established** a new branch.*
→ *The company **set up** a new branch.*

5. Communicative practice (15–20 minutes)

Option A: Ambiguity challenge

Students write **two sentences** using the same phrasal verb with **different meanings**.

Example (*run out*):

- *We ran out of milk.*
- *Time ran out before we reached a decision.*

Partners guess the meaning.

Option B: Role-play/discussion

Topic ideas:

- Business meeting
- Problem-solving task
- Project review

Requirement:

- Use **at least 4 phrasal verbs**
- Each must show a **different meaning**

6. Feedback & Refinement (10 minutes)

- Peer correction: focus on meaning accuracy
- Teacher feedback:
 - Collocation errors
 - Register mismatches
 - Over-formal alternatives where phrasal verbs are expected

Extension/homework

Choose one:

1. **Phrasal verb map:** Students create a meaning map for one verb (e.g., *set up*)
2. **Text hunt:** Find 5 phrasal verbs in a news article and explain the meaning of each
3. **Style shift:** Rewrite a formal paragraph using more phrasal verbs—or vice versa

Common advanced learner pitfalls

- Assuming one meaning per phrasal verb
- Avoiding phrasal verbs in formal writing unnecessarily
- Using the wrong meaning in abstract contexts
- Over-reliance on one-word synonyms