

Teaching phrasal verbs using a literary text

Using authentic texts can be a motivating way to teach phrasal verbs. The relationship between phrasal verbs is more natural and can often be deduced from the surrounding context. This is teaching phrasal verbs as you would teach any other “difficult” words in a text.

The following lesson plan presents 8 new phrasal verbs using a literary text as a starting point. The learners deduce the meaning of the phrasal verbs from their context, and then write a follow up story using more new phrasal verbs.

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By Lindsay Clandfield

Lesson Aim: To present 4 to 8 phrasal verbs. To encourage students to deduce meaning from context in a piece of literary writing.

Level: Intermediate and above

Teaching Approach: You can teach phrasal verbs using an authentic text in which phrasal verbs occur. Here the phrasal verbs are not necessarily linked in a thematic sense; their relationship depends on the surrounding text and is therefore more natural. This manner of teaching phrasal verbs is similar to teaching other items of vocabulary from context. Notice that in the text the phrasal verbs are highlighted in bold, this is so that learners notice them. The exercises are designed to get students to speculate about their meaning, before moving on to production.

One of the advantages of this approach is its authenticity. You might want to make your own similar exercise from a text of your choosing. This however can be a difficult task. Works of fiction and letters tend to have more phrasal verbs than newspaper articles for example. This is because phrasal verbs are more common in informal language.

For more on teaching using literature, see the articles in the [Onestopenglish Methodology section](#).

Stage One

Ask learners to make a list in English of all the things that come into their mailbox in an average week. Tell them to do this alone for one minute. Then compare with a partner. Who gets the most mail? Who gets the best mail? Tell the learners that today they will read a story about someone waiting for an important letter.

Stage Two

Distribute the worksheet and ask learners to look at exercise A. Make sure they understand the questions. Tell them they have exactly one minute to read through the text. After the minute is up, tell them to turn their papers over and ask the questions.

Answers: a letter from the acting school; no, the letter didn't arrive

Stage Three

Now let them re-read the text. Tell them to do the questions in B, but allow more time for this. The learners could do this in pairs.

Answers:

1. He bounded down (half jumping half running) the stairs.
2. Fliers, tax communications, advertising offers and bills.
3. He tore them open very quickly, almost frantically.
4. He was very excited.

5. He was waiting for a letter from the acting school
6. It was full of paper in little balls.

Stage Four

Tell students to look at the phrasal verbs highlighted in the text. Working with a partner, they should try to explain what they think the phrasal verb means. They can use their own language or mime if they like. Direct them to a dictionary if they are completely stuck. Ask students to report back, then do exercise C where they have to fill in the gap with the correct phrasal verb.

Answers: open up; scrunched it up; fell upon; dawned on

Macmillan English Dictionary

Open (something) up - to open a locked door, container or building.

Scrunch (something) up - to press or squeeze something into a smaller shape

Fall upon (something) - to move quickly downwards

(something) Dawn on (somebody) - if something dawns on you, you realize it for the first time.

Stage Five

Show students the next five phrasal verbs in exercise D. After they have read the definition, tell them to think of an example sentence that could illustrate the phrasal verb. When they have one they should write it down. Then ask them to swap sentences with someone else to see what the other person has written. Finally, put the learners into pairs and ask them to write a follow up to this story, describing the day the important letter arrived. Tell them that they must try to incorporate at least two of the phrasal verbs from the list or the original text.

Stage Six

You could collect the work and correct it later, or have students make some peer corrections on each other's work. A nice follow up would be to let students exchange and read each other's stories. Direct students' attention to the tip on phrasal verbs for this lesson, which looks at how some phrasal verbs can have more than one meaning.

Optional Follow Up

If your learners have access to the Internet, they can do the online activities on phrasal verbs which are related to this lesson.

WAITING FOR AN IMPORTANT LETTER

a BEFORE YOU READ

You are going to read a short extract about a man who is waiting for an important letter. Read the text quickly and answer the following questions. It doesn't matter if you don't understand every word of the text, just try to get a general idea.

What kind of letter was Pat waiting for?

Did the letter arrive?

It was approximately fifteen minutes past eight the following morning when Pat, lying in bed, heard the plaintive whistling of Tommy Noble the postman as he came sauntering up the lane, followed by the tantalizing flap of the letter box. Within seconds, he found himself bounding down the stairs, **falling upon** his knees in the hallway and **opening up** letters in what can only be described as a 'near-frenzy'. His heart sank as Reader's Digest fliers, electricity bills and HP Hoover* offers followed assorted tax communications in their horrid brown envelopes and the realization slowly **dawned on** him that there was in fact nothing from the 'acting school'. This procedure was repeated, with startling exactitude, the following morning – indeed the one after that, also – with Pat on broken knees in the hallway surrounded by '**scrunched-up**' balls of unwanted missives, but nowhere near him the one his heart so urgently desired.

Patrick McCabe, *Emerald Germs of Ireland*, 2001 Picador

* a Hoover is the British English word for a vacuum cleaner

b COMPREHENSION

Now reread the text and answer the following questions. First try to guess the meaning of any difficult words from the context. If you still don't understand, use an English dictionary to help you.

1. How did Pat go down the stairs?
2. What was in the letterbox that day?
3. How did he open the letters?
4. What were his emotions when he opened the mail the first day?
5. What was he waiting for?
6. What did the hallway look like after a couple of days?

C FOCUS ON PHRASAL VERBS

The underlined words in the text are examples of phrasal verbs. Use the same phrasal verbs in the following sentences. You may have to change the form of the verb.

1. It's the police! _____ and let us in!
2. He was so angry with his exam that he _____ it _____ and threw it in the garbage.
3. It was so romantic! Last night my boyfriend _____ his knees and asked me to marry him!
4. It suddenly _____ me that my exam was on Wednesday and I hadn't studied for it!

d FOCUS ON PHRASAL VERBS 2

Look at the following phrasal verbs and their definitions from the Macmillan English Dictionary.

light up (intransitive/transitive) If someone's face or eyes light up, they express a strong emotion, usually happiness or excitement.

call in (sick) to telephone the place where you work and tell them that you won't go to work because you are sick

slam down (transitive) To put something down with great force.

look for (transitive) to search for something

start off (intransitive) to begin moving, or to begin a trip

e WRITING

Now write a paragraph of what happened the day that the letter from the acting school arrived for Pat. Try to include at least two of the phrasal verbs from the list in exercise D.

Tips for Understanding phrasal verbs

Some phrasal verbs have more than one meaning. Often one of the meanings is more idiomatic than the other. Look at the following phrasal verbs. They all appeared in the exercises above, but they can also have another (more idiomatic) meaning. Read the other meanings and the sample sentences.

Open up: to start to talk more about yourself.

It has taken a few months, but Katy is now starting to open to me.

Fall upon/on: If a job or duty falls on someone, it becomes their duty.

It fell on John to organise the office party.

Start off – make someone laugh or cry.

If you talk about that comedy film again, you'll start me off.

Call in – ask someone for help in a difficult situation.

The police were called in when somebody threw a stone through the shop window.