

To end up / To be up to

Yana from Moscow

It is not a secret at all that foreigners learning English have a lot of difficulties with phrasal verbs. So do I. I would be glad to know explanations for the phrases: 'to end up' and 'to be up to'.

Gareth Rees answers

Well Yana, thank you for your question which as you say is about phrasal or multi-word verbs. These are verbs which have more than one part and they can be difficult for learners of English partly because there are so many and also because they often have more than one meaning.

The two you've chosen though are not so difficult. First of all 'to end up' means to reach a final position. For example, about travel: "They are travelling across Europe by train and they'll end up in Paris. From there, they fly back to the US." Or, another example, from life: "I studied medicine at university but I ended up working for an accountancy firm." In that second example the final job for the person was as an accountant even though they started by studying medicine. They 'ended up' working as an accountant.

Now, 'to be up to' has two meanings. The first means that someone is capable of doing a task or facing a challenge. For example: "She's up to the job. In fact, she'll probably deliver the report early." Here the woman is definitely able to do the job. She's 'up to' the job.

The second meaning, and I think it is the more common one, is similar to 'to do something'.

If a father hears his children making a noise he might shout: "What are you up to?" and he wants to know what they are doing. This meaning of 'to be up to' is often used when you are suspicious of something. You think someone is behaving in a strange way and you don't know why they are doing something. For example, a teacher sees three students go into an empty classroom. The teacher might say: "Did you see those students go in that room? What are they up to? Let's go and have a look."

Now, this phrase, 'to be up to' is also used to talk about someone's free time. For example: "What are you up to this weekend?" is an informal way to ask what someone is doing over the weekend, to ask if they have any plans.

So, I think I've ended up at the end of the explanation, I hope it has helped. By the way Yana, what are you up to tonight?

Gareth Rees has been an English language teacher and teacher trainer for over 10 years. He is currently a lecturer at London Metropolitan University and his first course book for English Language learners is due to be published in 2007.