

Up on the Downs, or Down on your Uppers

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The title is just a play upon words. In England a Down can be an upland, having a derivation related to *dun* od *dune*, and to be down on your uppers is to be too poor to re-sole your shoes. But these are far from the only oddities about our use of the words *up* and *down*.

It all starts straightforwardly with the obvious meanings of higher and lower directions of movement and position. Then there is the figurative use, indicating increase (of size or number) or improvement (of mood or grade). So we have –

Climb up or down the ladder

Walk up or down the hill

Upgrade or downgrade a pupil

Feel upbeat or downbeat.

This all feels very simple and obvious, but in fact our usage is very varied and full of idioms and anomalies. You might think that, in spatial contexts at least, the meanings would be clear. Yet you can perfectly well say that you saw people strolling up and down the street, without any suggestion that the street is other than completely flat. Even more confusingly (to a foreign student) I could say ‘I reached the top of the hill, only to see my fellow ramblers **up** ahead in the valley below’.

Up and **Down** – especially **Up** – can be used as –

An adverb (**come up**)

A preposition (**go down the road**)

As a prefix in a compound (**upstairs**)

As a suffix in a compound (a **link-up**)

Compounds with **up** and **down** as **prefixes** often go in pairs with more or less opposite meanings. For instance: **upstairs/downstairs, upmarket/downmarket, uprate/downrate, upgrade/downgrade, upload/download, upbeat/downbeat, uppers/downers**. However, some pairs are not opposites at all, such as **upright and downright**, which are not even the same part of speech, and there are several singletons like **downcast** with no **upcast** and **uphold** with no **downhold**.

When **up** and **down** are used as suffixes there is even less pairing. A **let-down** does not relate to **no let-up**, a **breakdown** is not the opposite of a **break-up** (in fact with relationships they mean almost the same thing). One important feature of these formations is that they are a way of making nouns out of verbs: to **lock** produces a **lock-up** and a **lockdown**, and there are singleton nouns such as **back-up, bust-up, call-up, foul-up, hang-up, hold-up, mock-up, pin-up, pick-up, set-up, shake-up, wind-up**.

Another effect of adding **up** to a verb is in expressions like **freshen up, lighten up, cheer up**, where a transitive verb such **to cheer** gets to mean to cheer yourself up, making it have a reflexive sense when no other object is specified. Similarly, there is **bear up, shut up, wake up, smarten up, wrap up**.

The range of idioms is so wide that it is not possible to say exactly what semantic value attaches to the word **up**. Sometimes the use even seems to be gratuitous. For instance, what difference is there between telling you to **sit** or **sit down stand** or **stand up**? However, if I just said **Slow** rather than **Slow down** you might not immediately take it as a verb, since **slow** is also an adjective. When used in conjunction with a basic word like **make**, a host of idioms occur having varied meanings- **she made up her face, she made up an excuse for being rude, she made it up yo me later, I was just there to make up the numbers, the make-up of the committee was rather narrow, make up your mind**. In the same way, **up** creates multiple idioms with the verbs **set** and **do**, as **I'm upset at the whole set-up, Do up your coat, He is doing up the sitting room**.

Yet another type of cluster appears when a second preposition is used in conjunction with **up** or **down**. The following related set os sentences illustrates this: -

**I live up in the country
But I'm up to town today for a quiz contest
I'll be up against the big guns
But I'm up for the challenge
I am well up in general knowledge
And I have read up on some special areas
So I hope I am up to it
Anyway it is up to me to do my best
And it is down to me if I fail.**

Returning to the anomalies of our **up** and **down** idioms, here is a small collection: -

If you and your partner have broken up, the relationship has broken down.

If the doctor tells you to lie up for a bit, he means you should lie down.

If I tell you to slow up, I expect you to slow doen.

Each night I close up the shop: when I retire I'll close it down.

In case of shortages, lay up supplies – or lay supplies down.

and finally

Hoping these observations were worth writing down, I wrote them up.