

Mastering Prepositions

Stan C. Smith

(Much of this content is borrowed from: <https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/prepositions>)

A **preposition** is a word or group of words used before a noun, pronoun, or noun phrase to show direction, time, place, location, spatial relationships, or to introduce an object. Some examples of prepositions are words like **in**, **at**, **on**, **of**, and **to**.

Prepositions of Direction

To refer to a direction, use the prepositions *to*, *(in)to*, and *on(to)*.

- She drove **to** the store.
- Don't ring the doorbell. Come right **in(to)** the house.
- Drive **on(to)** the grass and park the car there.

Prepositions of Time

To refer to one point in time, use the prepositions *in*, *at*, and *on*.

Use **in** with parts of the day (not specific times), months, years, and seasons.

- He reads **in** the evening.
- The weather is cold **in** December.

Use **at** with the time of day. Also use **at** with noon, night, and midnight.

- I go to work **at** 8:00.
- He eats lunch **at** noon.

Use **on** with days.

- I work **on** Saturdays.
- He does laundry **on** Wednesdays.

To refer to extended time, use the prepositions *since*, *for*, *by*, *during*, *from...to*, *from...until*, and *(with)in*.

- I have lived in Minneapolis **since** 2005. (I moved there in 2005 and still live there.)
- He will be in Toronto **for** 3 weeks. (He will spend 3 weeks in Toronto.)
- She will finish her homework **by** 6:00. (Sometime between now and 6:00.)
- He works part time **during** the summer. (For the period of time throughout the summer.)
- They are in school **from** August **until** May. (Starting in August and ending in May.)
- She will graduate **within** 2 years. (Not longer than 2 years.)

Prepositions of Place

To refer to a place, use the prepositions *in* (the point itself), *at* (the general vicinity), *on* (the surface), and *inside*(something contained).

- They will meet **in** the lunchroom.
- She was waiting **at** the corner.
- He left his phone **on** the bed.
- Place the pen **inside** the drawer.

To refer to an object higher than a point, use the prepositions *over* and *above*. To refer to an object lower than a point, use the prepositions *below*, *beneath*, *under*, and *underneath*.

- The bird flew **over** the house.
- The plates were on the shelf **above** the cups.
- Basements are dug **below** ground.
- There is hard wood **beneath** the carpet.
- The squirrel hid the nuts **under** a pile of leaves.
- The cat is hiding **underneath** the box.

To refer to an object close to a point, use the prepositions *by*, *near*, *next to*, *between*, *among*, and *opposite*.

- The gas station is **by** the grocery store.
- The park is **near** her house.
- Park your bike **next to** the garage.
- There is a deer **between** the two trees.
- There is a purple flower **among** the weeds.
- The garage is **opposite** the house.

Prepositions of Location

To refer to a location, use the prepositions *in* (an area or volume), *at* (a point), and *on* (a surface).

- They live **in** the country. (an area)
- She will find him **at** the library. (a point)
- There is a lot of dirt **on** the window. (a surface)

Prepositions of Spatial Relationships

To refer to a spatial relationship, use the prepositions *above*, *across*, *against*, *ahead of*, *along*, *among*, *around*, *behind*, *below*, *beneath*, *beside*, *between*, *from*, *in front of*, *inside*, *near*, *off*, *out of*, *through*, *toward*, *under*, and *within*.

- The post office is **across** the street from the grocery store.
- We will stop at many attractions **along** the way.
- The kids are hiding **behind** the tree.
- His shirt is **off**.
- Walk **toward** the garage and then turn left.
- Place a check mark **within** the box.

Some verbs and adjectives are followed by a certain preposition.

But remember... Sometimes verbs and adjectives can be followed by different prepositions, giving the phrase different meanings.

Some Common Verb + Preposition Combinations

About: *worry*, *complain*, *read*

- He **worries about** the future.
- She **complained about** the homework.
- I **read about** the flooding in the city.

At: *arrive (a building or event)*, *smile*, *look*

- He **arrived at** the airport 2 hours early.
- The children **smiled at** her.
- She **looked at** him.

From: *differ*, *suffer*

- The results **differ from** my original idea.
- She **suffers from** dementia.

For: *account*, *allow*, *search*

- Be sure to **account for** any discrepancies.
- I returned the transcripts to the interviewees to **allow for** revisions to be made.
- They are **searching for** the missing dog.

In: *occur*, *result*, *succeed*

- The same problem **occurred in** three out of four cases.
- My recruitment strategies **resulted in** finding 10 participants.

- She will **succeed in** completing her degree.

Of: approve, consist, smell

- I **approve of** the idea.
- The recipe **consists of** three basic ingredients.
- The basement **smells of** mildew.

On: concentrate, depend, insist

- He is **concentrating on** his work.
- They **depend on** each other.
- I must **insist on** following this rule.

To: belong, contribute, lead, refer

- Bears **belong to** the family of mammals.
- I hope to **contribute to** the previous research.
- My results will **lead to** future research on the topic.
- Please **refer to** my previous explanation.

With: (dis)agree, argue, deal

- I **(dis)agree with** you.
- She **argued with** him.
- They will **deal with** the situation.

Ending a Sentence With a Preposition

At one time, schools taught students that a sentence should never end with a preposition. HOWEVER... there are times when following this rule creates unclear or awkward sentences. Since the purpose of writing is to clearly communicate, it is acceptable to end a sentence with a preposition if the alternative would create confusion or is too overly formal.

Example: The car had not been paid for. (Ends with a preposition but is acceptable)

Unclear Revision: Paid for the car had not been. (Unclear sentence.)

Example: I would like to know where she comes from. (Ends with a preposition but is acceptable)

Overly Grammatical Revision: I would like to know from where she comes. (Grammatical but overly formal. Nobody actually speaks like this.)

Unnecessary Prepositions

If the preposition is unnecessary, leave it out. This creates more clear and concise writing.

Example: Where are the plates **at**?

Revision: Where are the plates?

Example: She jumped **off of** the balance beam.

Revision: She jumped **off** the balance beam.

Your Preposition Secret Weapon: **Google Books Ngram Viewer**

Using this tool, you can see the frequency of phrases in books that Google has scanned--millions of books, many of which went through an editing process, which means they're more representative of Standard English than a plain old Google Internet search.

<https://books.google.com/ngrams>
