

Prepositions

Prepositions (e.g., on, in, at, and by) usually appear as part of a **prepositional phrase**. Their main function is to allow the noun or pronoun in the phrase to modify another word in the sentence. Prepositional phrases always begin with a preposition and end with a noun, pronoun, or other word group that functions as the object of the preposition (e.g., in *time*, on the *table*).

A preposition can be one word (e.g., *about*, *despite*, *on*) or a word group (e.g., *according to*, *as well as*, *in spite of*). Place prepositional phrases as close as possible to the words they modify. Adjectival prepositional phrases usually appear right after the noun or pronoun they modify and answer questions like *Which one?* and *What kind of?* Adverbial phrases can appear anywhere in a sentence and answer questions like *When?* *How?* and *Why?*

The purpose of prepositions is to express positioning for the nouns and pronouns in your sentence.¹ The use of prepositions can be complex, making it difficult to pick the right one for a sentence. Here are some of the most common prepositions:²

about	before	excepting	near	throughout
above	behind	excluding	next to	till
according to	below	following	of	to
across	beneath	for	off	toward
after	beside	from	on	under
against	between	in	on account of	underneath
along	beyond	in addition to	onto	unlike
along with	by	in case of	on top of	until
among	by means of	in front of	out	up
apart from	by way of	in place of	out of	upon
around	concerning	in regard to	outside	up to
as	despite	in spite of	over	via
as to	down	including	past	with
as well as	due to	inside	regarding	with reference to
aside from	during	inside of	round	within
at	except	into	since	with respect to
because of	except for	like	through	without

Idiomatic prepositions:

Certain verbs are followed by certain prepositions: *He was listening to music. We rely on each other.* Checking a verb in the dictionary will tell you which prepositions will follow it. Similarly, certain nouns and adjectives are followed by certain prepositions: *He has an interest in anthropology. She puts emphasis on the importance of rules.* Again, checking nouns and adjectives in the dictionary will tell you which prepositions follow it.

¹ Buckley, J. (2003). *Checkmate: A writing reference for Canadians*. Nelson: Scarborough, Ontario.

² Aaron, J.E. & McArthur, M. (2006). *The little brown compact handbook* (3rd ed.). Pearson Longman: Toronto.

Prepositions

Adverbial and adjectival prepositional phrase

Prepositional phrases serve as adjectives or adverbs within sentences. Prepositions functioning like adverbs can go anywhere in a sentence, depending on the emphasis you want. Prepositions that function like adjectives go right after the noun they modify.

Examples:

- Would you put your health records on the Web?
In this sentence, *on the Web* is an adverbial prepositional phrase.
- My cellphone works in Asia and Europe.
In this sentence, *in Asia and Europe* is an adverbial prepositional phrase.
- Einstein's special theory of relativity describes the motion of particles at almost the speed of light.
In this sentence, *at almost the speed of light* is an adjectival prepositional phrase.
- Anna and Otto wrote a guide to the first year of parenthood.
In this sentence, *to the first year* is an adjectival prepositional phrase – and so is *of parenthood*.

Prepositions describing relationships in time

The prepositions **at**, **on**, and **in** are conventionally used for certain time relations.

TIME WITH **at**

- exact time: **at** 3 P.M., **at** midnight
- meal times: **at** dinner, **at** breakfast
- parts of the day, when no article is used for the part of the day: **at** night, **at** daybreak, **at** noon (*compare: in* the morning, *in* the evening)
- age: **At** 21 you are legally considered a full adult.

TIME WITH **on**

- days of the week: **on** Monday, **on** Tuesdays
- parts of the day, when the day is named: **on** Friday evening, **on** Saturday morning
- dates: **on** July 28th, **on** September 22nd

TIMES WITH **in**

- seasons: **in** spring, **in** summer
- months: **in** April, **in** November, **in** the third month
- years: **in** 2056, **in** 1956
- durations: **in** ten minutes, **in** four days, **in** a month

Prepositions describing relationships in space

at, by, in, on

show an object's
settled position or
position after it has

I arrived **at** the Baghdad airport.
An old power plant sat unused **by** the school.
In this town most people work at the call centre.
They carry their children **on** their backs.

Prepositions

moved

to, onto, into
 show the direction
 of movement toward
 a point, surface, or
 area

They brought their babies **to** the clinic.
 She placed the crown **onto** his head.
 Walking **into** his office is like walking **into** a zoo.

by, along, through
 show the direction of
 movement next to or
 past a point, surface,
 or area

We drove **by** the ocean.
 From their castles **along** the Rhein River, German princes
 could regulate river traffic.
 Omero Catan, a salesperson from New York, drove the first car
through the Lincoln Tunnel after waiting in line for 30 hours.

from, out of
 show the direction of
 movement away from
 a point, surface, or
 area

The joropo is a waltzy musical form **from** Venezuela.
 After the airplane crashed, she had to walk **out of** the jungle.

Practice: Preposition

- 1) John is a successful man. He works ____ Wall Street.
- 2) University convocations take place ____ May and ____ October.
- 3) I missed the ending of the movie because my DVD player broke _____ the last scene.
- 4) I drink a lot of coffee because there is a Tim Horton's _____ from my house.
- 5) I like all types of vegetables _____ for celery.
- 6) Classes were cancelled yesterday _____ the weather.
- 7) Have you ever been to Wolfville? It is _____ the Annapolis Valley.
- 8) It is very hard to take a math exam _____ a calculator.
- 9) Nigel will be up all night. He has to keep writing _____ his essay is finished.
- 10) We are meeting _____ 3:00 _____ Robie Street.
- 11) She has trouble sleeping because the man in the apartment _____ her plays the drums.
- 12) We wanted to be outside so we went for a walk in the park _____ the cold.
- 13) Jennifer was late when she reached the meeting. It was further _____ of town than she expected.
- 14) We decided to spend Saturday night at home with a movie _____ of going out.
- 15) You cannot see him in the picture because somebody is standing _____ him.

Answers: 1) *on*; 2) *in* and *in*; 3) *during*; 4) *across*; 5) *except*; 6) *because of/ due to*; 7) *in*; 8) *without*; 9) *until*; 10) *at* and *on*; 11) *above*; 12) *in spite of*; 13) *out*; 14) *instead of*; 15) *in front of*