

Topic: Prepositions

Introduction:

Prepositions are words normally placed before nouns or pronouns. Prepositions can also be followed by verbs but, except after *but* and *except*, the verb must be in the gerund form:

- He is talking of emigrating.
- They succeeded in escaping.

The student has two main problems with prepositions. He has to know (a) whether in any construction a preposition is required or not, and (b) which preposition to use when one is required.

The first problem can be especially troublesome to a European student, who may find that a certain construction in his own language requires a preposition, whereas a similar one in English does not, and vice versa: e.g. in most European languages purpose is expressed by a preposition + infinitive; in English it is expressed by the infinitive only:

I came here to study.

The student should note also that many words used mainly as prepositions can also be used as conjunctions and adverbs. Where this is the case it will be pointed out in the following paragraphs.

Alternative position of prepositions

A) Prepositions normally precede nouns or pronouns. In two constructions, however, it is possible in informal English to move the preposition to the end of the sentence:

In questions beginning with a preposition + *whom/which/what/whose/where*:

- To whom were you talking? (formal)
- Who were you talking to? (informal)
- In which drawer does he keep it? (formal)
- Which drawer does he keep it in? (informal)

It used to be thought ungrammatical to end a sentence with a preposition, but it is now accepted as a colloquial form. Similarly in relative clauses, a preposition placed before whom/which (can be moved to the end of the clause. The relative pronoun is then often omitted:

- the people with whom I was travelling (formal)
- the people I was travelling with (informal)
- the company from which I hire my TV set (formal)
- the company I hire my TV set from (informal)

B) But in phrasal verbs the preposition/adverb remains after its verb, so the formal type of construction is not possible, the children I was looking after could not be rewritten with after + whom and Which bridge did they blow up? Could not be rewritten with up + which.

Omission of to and for before indirect objects:

A sentence such as I gave the book to Tom could also be expressed:

- I gave Tom the book, i.e. the indirect object can be placed first and the preposition to omitted.

We can use this construction with the following verbs: bring, give, hand, lease (in a will), lend, offer, pass (= hand), pay, play (an instrument/piece of music), promise, sell, send, show, sing, take, tell (= narrate, inform):

- I showed the map to Bill = I showed Bill the map.
- They sent £5 to Mr Smith = They sent Mr Smith £5.

Similarly I'll find a job for Ann could be expressed I'll find Ann a job (putting the indirect object first and omitting for). This construction is possible after book, build, buy, cook, (bake, boil, fry etc.). fetch, find, get, keep, knit, leave, make, order, reserve:

- I'll get a drink for you = I'll get you a drink.
- I bought a book for James = I bought James a book.

Normally either construction can be used. But:

The construction without preposition is preferred when the direct object is a phrase or a clause:

- Tell her the whole story.
- Show me what you've got in your hand.

The construction with preposition is preferred:

(a) When the indirect object is a phrase or a clause:

- We kept seats for everyone on our list/for everyone who had paid.
- I had to show my pass to the man at the door.

(b) When the direct object is it or them. Sentences such as They kept it for Mary, She made them for Bill, We sent it to George cannot be expressed by a verb + noun + pronoun construction.

If the indirect object is also a pronoun (I sent it to him) it is sometimes possible to reverse the pronouns and omit to (I sent him it), but this cannot be done with for constructions and is better avoided.

This restriction does not apply to other pronoun objects:

- He gave Bill some. He didn't give me any.
- He bought Mary one. I'll show you something.
-

C. promise, show, tell can be used with indirect objects only, without to:

-promise us, show him, tell him

read, write can be used similarly, but require to:

- read to me ,write to them

play, sing can be used with to or for:

- play to us, play for us, sing to us, sing for us

Use and omission of to with verbs of communication

Verbs of command, request, invitation and advice, e.g. advise, ask, beg, command, encourage, implore, invite, order, recommend, remind, request, tell, urge, warn, can be followed directly by the person addressed (without to) + infinitive:

- They advised him to wait.
- I urged her to try again.

-

The person addressed (without to) can be used after advise, remind, tell, warn with other constructions also:

- He reminded them that there were no trains after midnight.
- They warned him that the ice was thin/warned him about the ice

But note that recommend (= advise) when used with other constructions needs to before the person addressed:

- He recommended me to buy it but He recommended it to me.
- He recommended me (for the post) would mean 'He said I was suitable'.

When ask is used with other constructions the person addressed is often optional. The preposition to is never used here:

- He asked (me) a question.
- He asked (me) if I wanted to apply.
- She asked (her employer) for a day off.

call (= shout), complain, describe, explain, grumble, murmur, mutter, say, shout, speak, suggest, talk, whisper need to before the person addressed, though it is not essential to mention this person:

- Peter complained (to her) about the food.
- She said nothing (to her parents).
- He spoke English (to them).

shout at can be used when the subject is angry with the other person:

- He shouted at me to get out of his way.

compare with He shouted to me which means he raised his voice because I was at a distance.

Time and date: at, on, by, before, in

A. at, on

-at a time:

-at dawn; at six; at midnight; at 4.30.

- at an age:

- at sixteen/at the age of sixteen

- She got married at seventeen.

- on a day/date:

- on Monday; on 4 June; on Christmas day

Exceptions:

- at night

- at Christmas, at Easter (the period, not the day only)

on the morning/afternoon/evening/night of a certain date:

- We arrived on the morning of the sixth.

- It is also, of course, possible to say:

this/next Monday etc., any Monday, one Monday

B. by, before

- by a time/date/period = at that time or before/not later than that date. It often implies 'before that time/date':

- The train starts at 6.10, so you had better be at the station by 6.00.

- by + a time expression is often used with a perfect tense, particularly the future perfect (see 216):

- By the end of July I'll have read all those books.

before can be preposition, conjunction or adverb:

- Before signing this . . . (preposition)
- Before you sign this . . . (conjunction)
- I've seen him somewhere before. (adverb)
-

C. on time, in time, in good time

- on time = at the time arranged, not before, not after:
- The 8.15 train started on time. (It started at 8.15.)

in time/in time for + noun = not late; in good time (for) = with a comfortable margin:

- Passengers should be in time for their train.
- I arrived at the concert hall in good time (for the concert). (Perhaps the concert began at 7:30 and I arrived at 7:15.)
-

D. on arrival, on arriving, on reaching, on getting to

- on arrival/on arriving, he . . . = when he arrives/arrived, he ...
- on can also be used similarly with the gerund of certain other verbs (chiefly verbs of information):
- On checking, she found that some of the party didn't know the way.
- On hearing/Hearing that the plane had been diverted, they left the airport.

The on in the last sentence could be omitted.

E. at the beginning/end, in the beginning/end, at first/at last

- at the beginning (of)/at the end (of) = literally at the beginning/end:
 - At the beginning of a book there is often a table of contents.
 - At the end there may be an index.
 - in the beginning/at first = in the early stages. It implies that later on there was a change:
 - In the beginning/At first we used hand tools. Later we had machines.
- in the end/at last = eventually/after some time:
 - At first he opposed the marriage, but in the end he gave his consent.

Time: from, since, for, during

- from, since and for
- from is normally used with to or till/until:

Most people work from nine to five

- from can also be used of place:

Where do you come from?

- since is used for time, never for place, and means 'from that time to the time referred to'. It is often used with a present perfect or past perfect tense

He has been here since Monday, (from Monday till now)

He wondered where Ann was. He had with seen her since their quarrel.

- since can also be an adverb (see 37, 185-8):

He left school in 1983. I haven't seen him since.

- since can also be a conjunction of time:

He has worked for us ever since he left school.

It is two years since I last saw Tom = last saw Tom two years ago/I haven't seen Tom for two years.

- for is used of a period of time: for six years, for two months,
- for ever:

Bake it/or two hours.

He traveled in the desert for six months.

For + a period of time can be used with a present perfect tense or past perfect tense for an action which extends up to the time of speaking:

He has worked here for a year. (He began working here a year ago and still works here.)

- for used in this way is replaceable by since with the point in time when the action began:

He has worked here since this time last year.

- during and for
- during is used with known periods of time, i.e. periods known by name, such as Christmas, Easter or periods which have been already refilled:

during the Middle Ages during 1941

during the summer (of that year)

during his childhood

during my holidays

The action can either last the whole period or occur at some time within period:

It rained all Monday but stopped raining during the night. (at some point of time)

He was ill for a week, and during that week he ate nothing.

- for (indicating purpose) may be used before known periods:

I went there/I hired a car/I rented a house for my holidays/for the summer.

- for has various other uses: ;

He asked for £5. I paid £1 for it.

- I bought one for Tom. (See 88.)
- for can also be a conjunction and introduce a clause).

Time: to, till/until, after, afterwards (adverb)

- to and till/until
- to can be used of time and place; till/until of time only.
- We can use from ... to or from . . . till/until:

They worked from five to ten/from five till ten. (at five to ten would mean 'at 9:55'.)

- But if we have no from we use till/until, not to:

Let's start now and work till dark. (to would not be possible here.)

- till/until is often used with a negative verb to emphasize lateness:

We didn't get home till 2 a.m.

He usually pays me on Friday but last week he didn't pay me till the following Monday.

- till/until is very often used as a conjunction of time:

We'll stay here till it stops raining.

Go on till you come to the level crossing.

- But note that if 'you come to' is omitted, the till must be replaced by to:

Go on to the level crossing.

After and afterwards (adverb)

- after (preposition) must be followed by a noun, pronoun or gerund:

Don't bathe immediately after a meal/after eating.

Don't have a meal and bathe immediately after it.

- If we do not wish to use a noun/pronoun or gerund, we cannot use after, but must use afterwards (= after that) or then:

Don't have a meal and bathe immediately afterwards.

They bathed and afterwards played games/played games afterwards or

They bathed and then played games.

- afterwards can be used at either end of the clause and can be modified by soon, immediately, not long etc.:

Soon afterwards we got a letter.

We got a letter not long afterwards.

- after can also be used as a conjunction:

After he had tuned the piano it sounded quite different.

A Travel and movement: from, to, at, in, by, on, into, onto, off, out, out of

- We travel from our starting place to our destination:

They flew/drove/cycled/walked from Paris to Rome.

When are you coming back to England?

We also send/post letters etc. to people and places. (But see note on home below.)

- arrive at/in, get to, reach (without preposition)
- We arrive in a town or country, at or in a village, at any other destination:

They arrived in Spain/in Madrid.

I arrived at the hotel/at the airport/at the bridge/at the crossroads.

- get to can be used with any destination, and so can reach:

He got to the station just in time for his train.

I want to get to Berlin before dark.

They reached the top of the mountain before sunrise.

- get in (in = adverb) can mean 'arrive at a destination'. It is chiefly used of trains:

What time does the train get in? (reach the terminus/our station)

- Note also get there/back (there, back are adverbs).

- home

- We can use a verb of motion etc. + home without a preposition:

I took us an hour to get home.

They went home by bus.

- But if home is immediately preceded by a word or phrase a preposition is necessary:

She returned to her parents' home.

- We can be/live/stay/work etc. at home, at + . . . + home or in + . . . + home. But in cannot be followed directly by home:

You can do this sort of work at home or at/in your own home.

- Transport: by, on, get in/into/on/onto/off/out of

- We can travel by car (but in the/my/Tom's car), by bus/train/plane/helicopter/hovercraft etc. and by sea/air. We can also travel by a certain route, or by a certain place (though via is more usual):

We went by the M4. We went via Reading.

- We can walk or go on foot. We can cycle or go on a bicycle or by bicycle. We can ride or go on horseback.

- We get into a public or private vehicle, or get in (adverb).

- We get on/onto a public vehicle, or get on (adverb).

- But we go on board a boat (= embark).

- We get on/onto a horse/camel/bicycle.

- We get out of a public or private vehicle, or get out (adverb).

- We get off a public vehicle, a horse, bicycle, etc., or get off (adverb).

- get in/into/out/out of can also be used of buildings, institutions and countries instead of go/come/return etc. when there is some difficulty in entering or leaving, in and out here are used as adverbs.

I've lost my keys! How are we going to get into the flat/to get in? (adverb)

The house is on fire! We had better get out! (adverb)

It's difficult to get into a university nowadays.

F Giving directions: at, into, to etc. (prepositions), along, on (prepositions and adverbs) and till (conjunction):

Go along the Strand till you see the Savoy on your right.

The bus stop is just round the corner.

Turn right/left at the Post Office/at the second traffic lights.

Go on (adverb) past the post office.

Turn right/left into Fleet Street.

Take the first/second etc. turning on/to the right or on/to your right.

Go on (adverb) to the end of the road. (till could not be used here.)

You will find the bank on your left halfway down the street.

When you come out of the station you will find the bank opposite you/in front of you.

Get out (of the bus) at the tube station and walk on (adverb) till you come to a pub.

Get off (the bus! and walk back (adverb) till you come to some traffic lights.

- at, in; in, into; on, onto

- at and in

- at

- We can be at home, at work, at the office, at school, at university, at an address, at a certain point e.g. at the bridge, at the crossroads, at the bus-stop.

in

- We can be in a country, a town, a village, a square, a street, a room, a forest, a wood, a field, a desert or any place which has boundaries or is enclosed.
- But a small area such as a square, a street, a room, a field might be used with at when we mean 'at this point' rather than 'inside'.
- We can be in or at a building, in means inside only; at could mean inside or in the grounds or just outside. If someone is 'at the station' he could be in the street outside, or in the ticket office/waiting room/restaurant or on the platform.
- We can be in or at the sea, a river, lake, swimming pool etc.
- in here means actually in the water:

The children are swimming in the river.

- at the sea/river/lake etc. means 'near/beside the sea'. But at sea means 'on a ship'.

- in and into
- in as shown above normally indicates position.
- into indicates movement, entrance:

They climbed into the lorry. I poured the beer into a tankard.

Thieves broke into my house/My house was broken into.

- With the verb put, however, either in or into can be used:

He put his hands in/into his pockets.

- in can also be an adverb:

Come in = Enter. Get in (into the car).

- on and onto
- on can be used for both position and movement:

He was sitting on his case. Snow fell on the hills.

His name is on the door. He went on board ship.

- onto can be used (chiefly of people and animals) when there is movement involving a change of level:

People climbed onto their roofs. We lifted him onto the table.

The cat jumped onto the mantelpiece.

- on can also be an adverb:

Go on. Come on.

above, over, under, below, beneath etc.

- above and over
- above (preposition and adverb) and over (preposition) can both mean 'higher than' and sometimes either can be used:

The helicopter hovered above/over us.

Flags waved above/over our heads.

- But over can also mean 'covering', 'on the other side of', 'across' and 'from one side to the other':

We put a rug over him.

He lives over the mountains.

There is a bridge over the river.

- all over + noun/pronoun can mean 'in every part of':

He has friends all over the world.

- above can have none of these meanings.
- over can mean 'more than' or 'higher than'.
- above can mean 'higher than' only.
- Both can mean 'higher in rank'. But He is over me would normally mean 'He is my immediate superior', 'He supervises my work', above would not necessarily have this meaning.
- We have a bridge over a river, above the bridge means 'upstream'.

- over can be used with meals/food/drink:

They had a chat over a cup of tea. (while drinking tea)

- in the combination take + a time expression + over + noun/pronoun,
- over can mean 'to do/finish' etc.:

He doesn't take long over lunch/to eat his lunch.

He took ages over the job. (He took ages to finish it.)

- above can also be an adjective or adverb meaning 'earlier' (in a book, article etc.):

the above address (the previously mentioned address)

- below and under
- below (preposition and adverb) and under (preposition) can both mean 'lower than' and sometimes either can be used. But under can indicate contact:

She put the letter under her pillow.

The ice crackled under his feet.

- With below there is usually a space between the two surfaces:

They live below us. (We live on the fourth floor and they live on the third.)

Similarly: We live above them.

- below and under can mean 'junior in rank'. But He is under me implies that I am his immediate superior, below does not necessarily have this meaning.
- (Both over and under can be used as adverbs, but with a change of meaning,)

- beneath can sometimes be used instead of under, but it is safer to keep it for abstract meanings:

He would think it beneath him to tell a lie. (unworthy of him)

She married beneath her. (into a lower social class)

- beside, between, behind, in front of, opposite

Imagine a theatre with rows of seats: A, B, C etc.. Row A being nearest the stage.

Stage

Row A Tom Ann Bill

Row B Mary Bob Jane

This means that:

Tom is beside Ann; Mary is beside Bob etc.

Ann is between Tom and Bill; Bob is between Mary and Jane.

Mary is behind Tom; Tom is in front of Mary.

- But if Tom and Mary are having a meal and Tom is sitting at one side of the table and Mary at the other, we do not use in front of, but say:

Tom is sitting opposite Mary or Tom is facing Mary.

- But He stood in front of me could mean either 'He stood with his back to me' or 'He faced me'.

- People living on one side of a street will talk of the houses on the other side as the houses opposite (us) rather than the houses in front of us. With other things, however, these restrictions do not apply:

She put the plate on the table in front of him.

She sat with a book in front of her.

Where's the bank? - There it is, just in front of you!

There's a car-park in front of/at the back of the hotel.

E Don't confuse beside with besides.

- beside = at the side of:

We camped beside a lake.

- besides (preposition) = in addition to/as well as:

I do all the cooking and besides that I help Tom.

Besides doing the cooking I help Tom.

- besides (adverb) means (a) 'in addition to that/as well as that':

I do the cooking and help Tom besides

and (b) 'in any case/anyway':

We can't afford oysters. Besides, Tom doesn't like them.

- between and among
- between normally relates a person/thing to two other people/things,
- but it can be used of more when we have a definite number in mind;

Luxembourg lies between Belgium, Germany and France.

- among relates a person/thing to more than two others; normally we have no definite number in mind:

He was happy to be among friends again.

a village among the hills

- with could also be used instead of among in the last sentence above.

Also, of course, with a singular object:

He was with a friend.

Examples of other uses:

He cut it with a knife.

Don't touch it with bare hands.

The mountains were covered with snow.

I have no money with me/on me.

He fought/quarreled with everyone.

In descriptions:

the girl with red hair

the boy with his hands in his pockets

the man with his back to the camera/with his feet on his desk

- but and except (prepositions)

These have the same meaning and are interchangeable.

- but is more usual when the preposition + object is placed immediately after nobody/none/nothing/nowhere etc;

Nobody but Tom knew the way.

Nothing but the best is sold in our shops.

- except is more usual when the preposition phrase comes later in the sentence:

Nobody knew the way except Tom

- but is more emphatic than except after anybody/anything/anywhere etc.:

You can park anywhere but/except here. (You can't park here.)

- but and except take the bare infinitive (see 98).

Prepositions used with adjectives and participles

Certain adjectives and past participles used as adjectives can be followed by a preposition + noun/gerund.

Usually particular adjectives and participles require particular prepositions. Some of these are given below; others can be found by consulting a good dictionary, which after any adjective will give the prepositions that can be used with it.

- about, at, for, in, of, on, to, with used with certain adjectives and participles:

absorbed in involved in

according to keen on

accustomed to

liable for/to

afraid of

nervous of

anxious for/about

owing to

ashamed of

pleased with

aware of

prepared for
bad at/for
proud of
capable of
ready for
confident of
responsible for/to
due to/for
scared of
exposed to
sorry for/about
fit for
successful in
fond of
suspicious of
frightened of/at
terrified of
good at/for
tired of
interested in
used to

- She is afraid/frightened/scared of the dark.
- According to Tom it's 2.30. (Tom says it's 2:30.)
- He is bad/good at chess, (a bad/good player)
- Running is bad/good for you. (unhealthy/healthy)
- They are very keen on golf.

- Drivers exceeding the speed limit are liable to a fine.
- The management is not responsible for articles left in customers' cars.
- I'm sorry for your husband. (I pity him.)
- I'm sorry for forgetting the tickets.
- I'm sorry about the tickets.

Verbs and prepositions

A large number of verb + preposition combinations are dealt with in chapter 38. But there are a great many other verbs which can be followed by prepositions and some of these are listed below. More can be found in any good dictionary.

accuse of

insist on

apologize to / for

live on (food/money)

apply to /for

long for

ask for/about

object to

attend to

occur to

beg for

persist in

believe in

prefer to

beware of

prepare for

blame for

punish for

charge with (an offence)

quarrel with /about

compare with

refer to

comply with

rely on

conform to

remind of

consist of

resort to

deal in

succeed in

depend on

suspect of

dream of

think of/about

fight with/ for

wait for

fine for

warn of/about

hope/or wish for

- He was absorbed in his book.
- Do you believe in ghosts?
- They were charged with receiving stolen goods.
- You haven't complied with the regulations.
- For a week she lived on bananas and milk.

- It never occurred to me to insure the house.
- They persisted in defying the Saw.
- When arguments failed he resorted to threats.

- Notice also feel like + noun/pronoun = feel inclined to have something:

Do you feel like a drink/a meal/a rest?

feel like + gerund = feel inclined to do something:

I don't feel like walking there.

Passive verbs can of course be followed by by + agent; but they can also be followed by other prepositions:

The referee was booed by the crowd.

The referee was booed for his decision/for awarding a penalty.

- He left without paying his bill.
- I apologize/or not writing before.
- She insisted on paying/or herself.
- Before signing the contract, read the small print.

- A few noun + preposition + gerund combinations may also be noted:

There's no point in taking your car if you can't park.

What's the point of taking your car if you can't park?

Is there any chance/likelihood of his changing his mind?

Have you any objection to changing your working hours?

I am in favour of giving everyone a day off.

Gerunds after prepositions: Verbs placed immediately after prepositions must be in the gerund form.

The only exceptions to the gerund rule are except and but (preposition), which take the bare infinitive:

I could do nothing except agree.

He did nothing but complain.

However, if but is used as a conjunction, it can be followed directly by either full infinitive or gerund:

Being idle sometimes is agreeable, but being idle all the time might become monotonous.

To be idle sometimes is agreeable, but to be idle all the time etc.

Prepositions/adverbs

Many words can be used as either prepositions or adverbs:

He got off the bus at the corner. (preposition)

He got off at the corner. (adverb)

The most important of these are above, about, across, along, before, behind, below, besides, by, down, in, near, off, on, over, past, round, since, through, under, up:

They were here before six. (preposition)

He has done this sort of work before. (adverb)

Peter is behind us. (preposition)

He's a long way behind. (adverb)

She climbed over the wall. (preposition)

You'll have to climb over too. (adverb)

When the meeting was over the delegates went home. (adverb; here over = finished)

The shop is just round the corner. (preposition)

Come round (to my house) any evening. (adverb)

He ran up the stairs. (preposition)

He went up in the lift. (adverb)

Many of these words are used to form phrasal verbs

The plane took off. (left the ground)

He came round. (recovered consciousness)

Exercise: Fill in the blanks with appropriate prepositions. Choose your answers from the options given in the brackets.

1. This material is different^{from}..... that. (from / to / with)
2. You should explain this^{to}..... them. (to / at / with)
3. He has been absent^{since}..... Monday. (since / for / from)
4. I haven't been to the theatre^{for}..... a long time. (since / for / from)
5. He goes^{to}..... school by car. (to / at / on)
6. This is a comfortable house to liveⁱⁿ..... (on / at / in)
7. They are called^{by}..... different names. (by / with / for)
8. We should not spend money^{on}..... luxuries. (for / on / with)
9. I gave him a chair to sit (on / at / in)
10. The new term begins^{on}..... June 1st. (on / in / from)
11. He poured the tea^{into}..... the mug. (into / on / in)
12. He said that he was very pleased^{with}..... my work. (with / on / at)