

# PREPOSITION USAGE

## Introduction

Prepositions describe a relationship between other words in a sentence. They locate objects in time and space, describe location or movement and show how something is situated in relationship to something else. It can be difficult to define an individual preposition: most English prepositions have several different functions (e.g. "**at**" or "**for**") and also different prepositions can have similar uses (e.g. **in** the morning/**at** night, **by** car/**on** foot).

Prepositions are nearly always combined with other words in prepositional phrases, which consist of a preposition followed by a determiner, an adjective and finally a pronoun or noun (called the object of the preposition). This whole phrase then acts as an adjective or adverb, telling when or where, or under what conditions, or in what field, something happened.

e.g.

the most innovative inventions **in** the I.T. industry.  
...a part to play **in** expanding opportunities for all.  
...extend **into** new professional possibilities.  
...the VP shall, **before** the start of semester,...  
...inventory levels **throughout** the industry supply chain.

Below are examples of the major categories of preposition, with links to websites that give you more information. There are also links to quizzes and crosswords for self checking and practice.

This website gives detailed information on preposition usage.

<http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/prepositions.htm> (Accessed 7 February 2003)

## 1. Prepositions of Time: at, on, in, for and since

We use **at** to indicate specific times.

e.g.

The bomb is due to explode **at** 7p.m. precisely.  
The Hong Kong to Beijing train leaves **at** 6.30 a.m.

We use **on** to indicate days and dates.

e.g.

The entire Committee is meeting **on** Monday.  
Westerners celebrate New Year **on** 31st December.

We use **in** for non-specific times during a day, a month, a season, a year or an event.

e.g.

She always reads her emails **in** the morning.  
**In** the summer, it is difficult to work without air conditioning.  
The project began **in** March 2002.  
**In** the past she seldom took a taxi.

We use **for** when we measure time (seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years).

e.g.

The average working day lasts **for** 8 hours.  
Manufacturing industries have thrived in Hong Kong **for** many years.  
**For** over a century, the Americans have had business interests in the Pacific region.

We use **since** with a specific date or time (with the present perfect tense).

e.g.

He has worked here **since** 1999.  
She has been studying at the PolyU **since** September.  
He has been waiting to see his supervisor **since** 10.00a.m.

This website gives short explanations and examples of prepositions of time, place, and those used to introduce objects (at, in, on, since, for, during, within; at, of, for, about etc)

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslprep4.html>

(Accessed 7 February 2003)

## 2. Prepositions of Place or Location: at, on, and in

We use **at** for specific addresses.

e.g.

Many of the dotcom companies were situated **at** 21 Lyndhurst Terrace.  
...also **at** home, school, the office, the airport, the shops...

We use **on** to designate names of streets, avenues, etc.

e.g.

Kowloon Mosque is **on** Nathan Road.

...also **on** the computer, the bed , the floor, the plane, the MTR

We use **in** for the names of land-areas (towns, counties, states, countries, and continents).

e.g

Festival Walk shopping mall is **in** Kowloon Tong.

Mai Po marshes, famous for migrating birds, is **in** the New Territories.

The Hong Kong SAR is **in** China.

...also **in** (the) class, the library, the lab, the train, the car, the bedroom.

This website gives explanations, with graphics, of prepositions of location or place (at,in,on)

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslprep2.html>

(Accessed 7 February 2003)

### 3. Prepositions of Movement or Direction: to, into, onto, toward etc

We use **to** in order to express movement towards a place.

e.g.

They were driving **to** work together.

She's going **to** the professor's office this morning.

**Toward(s)** is also a helpful preposition to express movement.

e.g.

We're moving **toward** the end of an era.

This is a big step **towards** the fruition of my life's work.

This website gives explanations, with graphics, of prepositions of direction (to, into, onto).

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslprep.html>

(Accessed 7 February 2003)

#### 4. Prepositions of spatial relationships: above, before, across, through, around

These prepositions describe how one object relates to another

e.g.

70% of the group earned incomes **above** the poverty line.

The soldiers entered **through** the air conditioning shaft.

The children were asked to draw a circle **around** the face they recognised.

This website gives explanations, with graphics, of prepositions describing spatial relationships (above, below, around, behind, through etc)

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslprep3.html>

(Accessed 7 February 2003)

#### 5. Idiomatic Expressions with Prepositions

Idiomatic expressions use a variety of prepositions, depending on the object following; the context and the intended meaning.

e.g. **agree to** a proposal, suggestion, decision etc  
**agree with** a person  
**agree on** a price  
**agree in** principle

They **agreed to** abide by his decision.

She never **agrees with** me professionally but I like her.

Bargaining is the skill of both buyer and seller **agreeing on** a price.

e.g. **argue about** a matter  
**argue with** a person  
**argue for** or against a proposition

My father and I always **argue about** politics.

I never **argue with** my instructor.

Father Mello **argues for** asylum for the abode seekers.

e.g. **correspond to** a thing  
**correspond with** a person

A Postgraduate Diploma **corresponds to** a Masters degree without the dissertation.  
Jean Paul Sartre **corresponded with** other French philosophers in exile.

e.g. **compare to** ( to show likenesses)  
**compare with** ( to show differences, sometimes similarities)

It is difficult to **compare** living in Hong Kong **to** living in Canada.  
Her marks are above average **compared with** others in her year.

e.g. **live at** an address  
**live in** a house or city  
**live on** a street, housing estate  
**live with** other people

I **live at** 10 Downing St.  
They have **lived in** Shanghai for many years.  
We **live on** a residential estate in Aberdeen.  
The children **live with** their grandmother.

[Click here](#) for a short 10-question interactive quiz

### Links and quizzes:

This website gives a list of common prepositions and examples of prepositional phrases and prepositions at the end of a sentence

[http://www.unlv.edu/Colleges/Liberal\\_Arts/English/Writing\\_Center/Prepositions.htm](http://www.unlv.edu/Colleges/Liberal_Arts/English/Writing_Center/Prepositions.htm)  
(Accessed 7 February 2003)

These web pages give interactive quizzes for self-checking and practice.

[http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/quizzes/preposition\\_quiz1.htm](http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/quizzes/preposition_quiz1.htm)  
(Accessed 7 February 2003)

<http://a4esl.org/q/h/0101/es-prepositions.html>  
(Accessed 7 February 2003)

<http://a4esl.org/q/h/fb-bd-preposition.html>  
(Accessed 7 February 2003)

These web pages give preposition crosswords, with hints and answers.

[http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/quizzes/cross/cross\\_prep.htm](http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/quizzes/cross/cross_prep.htm)  
(Accessed 7 February 2003)

[http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/quizzes/cross/cross\\_prep2.htm](http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/quizzes/cross/cross_prep2.htm)

(Accessed 7 February 2003)

<http://iteslj.org/cw/1/vm-prep.htm>

(Accessed 7 February 2003)

