

Preposition Basics

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 in English are highly idiomatic. Although there are some rules for usage, much preposition usage is dictated by fixed expressions. In these cases, it is best to memorize the phrase instead of the individual preposition.

A Few Rules

Prepositions of Direction

To refer to a direction, use the prepositions "to," "in," "into," "on," and "onto."

- 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.
- She was born **in** 1996.
- We rake leaves **in** the fall.

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.
- She often goes for a walk **at** night.
- They go to bed **at** midnight.

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," "with," and "within."

- 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. (She will finish her homework sometime between now and 6:00.)
- He works part time **during** the summer. (For the period of time throughout the summer.)
- I will collect data **from** January **to** June. (Starting in January and ending in June.)
- 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.

Prepositions Following Verbs and Adjectives

Some verbs and adjectives are followed by a certain preposition. Sometimes verbs and adjectives can be followed by different prepositions, giving the phrase different meanings. To find which prepositions follow the verb or an adjective, look up the verb or adjective in an online dictionary, such as [Merriam Webster](#), or use a corpus, such as [The Corpus of Contemporary American English](#). Memorizing these phrases instead of just the preposition alone is the most helpful.

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.

Although verb + preposition combinations appear similar to phrasal verbs, the verb and the particle (in this case, the preposition) in these combinations cannot be separated like phrasal verbs. See more about this on our [verb choice page](#).

Some Common Adjective + Preposition Combinations

[illegible]

Composed			X					X	
Different				X					
Disappointed							X		X
Employed		X	X						
Essential								X	
	About	At	By	From	For	In	Of	To	With
Familiar									X
Good		X			X				
Grateful					X			X	
Interested						X			
Happy	X				X				X

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

However, in academic writing, you may decide that it is worth revising your sentences to avoid ending with a preposition in order to maintain a more formal scholarly voice.

Example: My research will focus on the community the students lived in.

Revision: My research will focus on the community in which the students lived.

Example: I like the people I am working with.

Revision: I like the people with whom I am working.

Prepositional Phrases and Wordiness

Like with [pronouns](#), too many prepositional phrases can create wordiness in a sentence:

Example: The author chose the mixed-method design to explain that the purpose **of** the study was to explore the leadership qualities **of** the principals **in** the schools as a means to gauge teacher satisfaction **in** the first year **of** teaching.

This type of sentence could be shortened and condensed to minimize the prepositional phrases and bring [clarity to the writer's intent](#):

Revision: The author chose the mixed-method design to explore the principals' leadership qualities and their impact **on** first-year teachers' satisfaction.

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.