

Grammar 18—Instrumental Case



To Identify the Instrument of the Action

The primary use of the instrumental case without a preposition is to indicate the instrument, equipment or means by which the action in the sentence is performed. For example:

Он писал <u>карандашом</u> .	He wrote <u>using a pencil</u> .
Они приехали <u>машиной</u> .	They arrived <u>by car</u> .
Анна открыла банку <u>ножом</u> .	Anna opened the can <u>with a knife</u> .
Шпион говорил <u>шёпотом</u> .	The spy spoke <u>in a whisper</u> .
Анна шла <u>полем</u> .	Anna was walking <u>by way of the field</u> .

The instrumental is often used with reflexive verbs:

Я занимаюсь <u>русским языком</u> .	I am studying <u>Russian</u> . (Lit: "I am occupying myself <u>with the Russian tongue</u> .")
Я пользуюсь <u>словарём</u> .	I am making use <u>of a dictionary</u> .
Он интересуется <u>этой книгой</u> .	He is interested <u>by this book</u> .

To Indicate a Role or Condition

Another important use of the instrumental case (again without a preposition) is to name a role in which someone or something serves. For example, it can be used with быть (to be) in the past or future:

Анна была <u>студентом</u> .	Anna was <u>a college student</u> .
Он был <u>больным</u> .	He was <u>a sick man</u> .
Когда я вырасту я буду <u>врачом</u> .	When I grow up will be <u>a doctor</u> .

Do not try to use the instrumental case to say that someone presently is something. Use the nominative:

Он <u>врач</u> .	He is <u>a doctor</u> .
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Also do not use the instrumental case to indicate a condition which has always been and cannot change.

Compare the following:

Вашингтон был <u>американец</u> .	Washington was an <u>American</u> . (all his life, nominative)
Вашингтон был <u>президентом</u> .	Washington was <u>president</u> . (for eight years, instrumental)

Certain verbs must always be used with the instrumental case because their meaning indicates a change of role or condition or service in a particular capacity:

Анна стала <u>матерью</u> .	Anna became <u>a mother</u> .
Сюзанна служила <u>учителем</u> .	Susanna served <u>as a teacher</u> .
Это послужит <u>примером</u> .	That will serve <u>as an example</u> .
Он является <u>террористом</u> .	He is being <u>a terrorist</u> .

With Prepositions

The instrumental case is used with certain prepositions to indicate static location:

с	with
над	over
под	under
между	between
перед	in front of

Translating from English

Be careful with the preposition "с". Do not use when identifying the instrument of an action (as described above), even where you would say "with" in English. If you do, the instrument will cease to be an instrument and will become a companion, often in defiance of common sense:

Анна открыла банку <u>с ножом</u> .	Anna opened the can <u>with the knife on it</u> . Or maybe: Anna <u>and the knife</u> opened the can.
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As you see from this example, inappropriate use of "с" creates weird unintended meaning.