

Campus Academic Resource Program

Prepositions

This handout will:

- Explain what prepositions are and how to use them
- List some of the most common prepositions
- Define important concepts related to prepositions with examples
- Clarify preposition rules
- Provide exercises for practice with prepositions

What Are Prepositions and How Do We Use Them?

Prepositions are short words that indicate the relationship between two other words. More specifically, a preposition connects a verb, noun, or adjective to another noun or pronoun in order to describe relationships of:

- Time (*before, after, during* class)
- Location in space (*in, at, around, by* the house)
- Action or descriptive information (*with* the green shirt; *except, despite* the fact)
 - Another way to consider prepositions is yourself in relation to a house. You can be: *in, behind, under, above, beside, by, at* the house. You can go *to* the house. You can come *from* the house.

As parts of speech go, prepositions can be confusing to work with. Nevertheless, as with any aspect of language, prepositions follow a set of easily applicable rules.

Important Definitions for Understanding Prepositions

An Object of a Preposition:

The object of the preposition is the noun or pronoun that follows the preposition, along with any adjectives that modify that noun or pronoun.

A Prepositional Phrase:

A phrase made up of a preposition and the object of a preposition.

- *Basic Example:* “at home.”
 - In the above example, “at” is the preposition, and “home” is the object of the preposition.
- *Complex Example:* “He is going to singing practice.”
 - In this example, “to” is the preposition and “singing practice” is the object of the preposition.
 - We can also break down the object of the preposition into its parts: “practice” is a **noun** and “singing” is an **adjective** that modifies the noun.

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A prepositional phrase can be used as an **adjective**. The following examples are prepositional phrases that act as adjectives. In this sense, the phrases themselves describe the nouns.

- “You can tell which clothes she wears most often: the jacket *with several holes*, the shoes *with missing laces*, and the jeans *without pockets*.
 - The prepositional phrases are italicized and operate as adjectives to describe the preceding nouns.
- He is the middle child, one of *twelve children*.
 - The italicized prepositional phrase describes how he is the middle child, or the prepositional phrase further qualifies the first clause of the sentence.

A prepositional phrase can also act as an **adverb**. In this case, the phrases themselves describe the verbs.

- *Strolling along the lake*, he felt peaceful even though he had a lot on his mind.
 - The italicized prepositional phrase describes the preceding verb, “strolling.”
- I do not think you did pay me back; I would have put the cash *into my wallet* immediately.
 - The italicized prepositional phrase describes where the speaker would have put the cash. The phrase describes the word “put.”

Preposition Rules

There are three main rules when it comes to prepositions. Examples of the rules have been included for clarity.

1. A preposition is always followed by a **noun** or pronoun. There are no exceptions to this rule.

- *Example*: “Danny likes to run around the pond.
“If we go to dinner around **sunset**, we might miss traffic.”

2. Most of the time, a preposition precedes the noun or pronoun that it modifies; this is why it is called a **preposition**. However, there are some cases where it sounds more natural to end a sentence with a preposition. The following are examples of such cases:

- **Passive constructions**: where it is not clear which person is doing the action.
 - *Example*: “We don’t want to get stepped **on**.”
 - In this example, we don’t know who would be stepping on us, so it is a passive construction.
- **Relative clauses**: clauses that give extra information about something without starting another sentence.
 - *Example*: “They must be dedicated to the cause that they are fighting **for**.”
 - In this example, “to the cause that they are fighting for” is additional information to “They must be dedicated” which can stand on its own.
- **Infinitive structures**: those that use the non-conjugated form of a verb (“to ____”).
 - *Example*: “Tom had no one to play **with**.”
 - Notice that “with,” not “to,” is the preposition in this sentence.
- **Questions beginning with who, where, what**:
 - *Example*: Who are you waiting **for**?
Is that what you’re going out **in**?

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Which library are you going **to**?

Who am I speaking **to**?

3. No part of a prepositional phrase can be the subject of a sentence.

- Because both the subject of a sentence and the object of a preposition tend to be nouns or pronouns, it might seem difficult to distinguish them from one another.
- However, we can use our knowledge upon prepositions and prepositional phrases to distinguish between them.

○ *Example:* “His dog Leonidas ran toward the squirrel.”

○ Both “dog” and “squirrel” are nouns. How do we tell which one is the **subject of the sentence** and which one is the **object of the preposition**?

- The parts of a prepositional phrase are the preposition and its object
- Neither the preposition nor its object can be the subject of a sentence
- So, to distinguish between the object of preposition and the subject of the sentence, simply identify the preposition, the object of the preposition, and the verb. Cross those out, and you are left with the subject of the sentence.

▪ *Example:* “His dog Leonidas ~~ran~~ ~~toward~~ ~~the squirrel.~~”

(verb)(preposition)(object of preposition)

Common English (Simple) Prepositions

Below is a list of some of the most common prepositions in English:

To	Beside	But (as in “all but one”)
From	By	Beyond
Out	Inside	Despite
In	Along	Except
Around	Anti	Excluding
About	At	Following
Above	Before	For
Below	After	Minus
With	During	Near
Against	Behind	Toward

Complex Prepositions

In addition to the one-word prepositions we have examined, there are also complex prepositions that consist of two- or three-word combinations acting as a single unit (“Prepositions,” Internet Grammar of English). They follow the same rules as their simple, one-word counterparts.

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Here are some examples of two-word complex prepositions:

according to	due to
along with	except for
apart from	instead of
because of	prior to
contrary to	regardless of

Like simple prepositions, complex prepositions always come before a noun.

- *Example:* **according to** Dickens
contrary to popular belief
due to injury

Here are some examples of three-word complex prepositions:

in aid of	in line with
on behalf of	in relation to
in front of	with reference to
in accordance with	with respect to
in line with	by means of

As with two-word complex prepositions, these combinations come before a noun.

- *Example:* **on behalf of** the board
in front of the library
with reference to his novel

Verb, Noun, and Adjective Combinations with Prepositions

Certain prepositions are often times so commonly used with other words that the two words are seen as a one entity. This occurs in three categories: verbs, nouns, and adjectives.

Verbs

In English, some verbs are commonly associated with specific prepositions.

- *Example:* “The student applied **to** several graduate programs.”
“Derrida’s argument differs **from** Miller’s in three main ways.”
- The underlined verbs are most commonly used with the bolded preposition in these examples.

For some verbs, using different prepositions results in different meanings.

- *Example:* “He said he will always care **for** me.”
“He said he will always care **about** me.”
- In this example, using the preposition **for** or **about** with the verb care results in two sentences with different meanings.

In many cases, it may seem confusing as to which preposition should be used with which verb. It may seem like more than one would be correct. It is quite possible that multiple prepositions can be used with certain verbs, as we have seen in the examples above. The English language is filled with idiomatic expressions which do not follow concrete rules concerning prepositions. The best way to familiarize oneself with using verb combinations correctly is with practice.

- *Example:* “I like to lie **in** bed when I watch television.”
“I like to lie **on** the couch when I watch television.”

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- Both sentences convey similar ideas, but use different prepositions. Lying **in bed** and **on the couch** both convey that the subject is prone on a comfortable object; however we would not say lying **on bed** or **in the couch**.

Nouns

As with verbs, certain nouns are associated with specific prepositions.

- *Example:* “I am waiting for the approval **of** my boss.”
“All we can do is hope **for** the best.”
- The underlined nouns are often joined with the bolded prepositions in these examples.

For some nouns, using different prepositions results in different meanings.

- *Example:* “I have a belief **in** Christianity.”
“I have a belief **about** Christianity.”
- In this example, using the preposition **in** or **about** with the noun belief results in two sentences with different meanings. Believing **in** Christianity means that you believe that it is true or that it exists, while a belief **about** Christianity means that you have a conviction or opinion about it.

Adjectives

Certain adjectives may also be associated with specific prepositions.

- *Example:* “Ken is married **to** Barbie.”
“Rich is interested **in** American history.”
- The underlined adjectives are often joined with the bolded prepositions in these examples.

For some adjectives, using different prepositions results in different meanings.

- *Example:* “John is often careless **about** his job.”
“John is often careless **at** his job.”
- In this example, using the preposition **about** or **at** with the adjective careless results in two sentences with different meanings. Being careless **about** his job might mean that John does things that could cause him to lose his job or simply that he does not care about his job, while being careless **at** his job might mean that John makes mistakes while at work. **About** expresses a quality while **at** expresses a place.

Deletion of Prepositions

Sometimes it is possible to delete the preposition. The deletion can either be optional or necessary.

Below are examples of both cases:

- Optional deletion:
 - When the preposition **for** expresses a span of time
 - *Example:* “We have studied here (for) 4 years.”
“(For) how long have you owned your car?”
 - When the preposition **on** is used before days of the week
 - *Example:* “Jenni went out for pizza (on) Saturday.”
“She bought a new dress (on) Sunday morning.”
 - In response to a question that would signify a temporal use of **in**, **at**, **on**, or **for**
 - *Example:* “How long have you had a cold?” “(For) two weeks.”
“When do you leave for work?” “(At) 7 A.M.”
- Necessary deletion:

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- When the temporal noun phrase contains a determiner as seen from the perspective of the speaker such as **last**, **next**, or **this**
- When the head noun of the noun phrase contains **before**, **after**, **next**, **last**, or **this** as part of its meaning
 - *Example:* “I was busy (on) last Friday.”
“We will be in Chicago (on) tonight.”
- When the temporal noun phrase contains a universal quantifier like **every** or **all**
 - *Example:* “We stayed in Toronto (for) all week.”
- When a locative noun, such as **home** or **downtown**, or the pro-adverbs **here** and **there** are used with a verb of motion or direction
 - *Example:* “We walked (to) home.”
“Mark walks (to) here every day.”

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Exercise 1

Look at the sentences below. Circle the prepositional phrases.

1. After visits to the panda exhibits in zoos, many people contribute money to wildlife organizations.
2. China also lends pairs of pandas to zoos around the world.
3. With no route to new supplies of bamboo, many pandas face the possibility of starvation.
4. During a search of the Internet, I discovered a breed of dog with a very interesting history.
5. The ancestors of the American Indian dog came across the Bering Straits from Asia with their Native American masters.
6. I have edited our training manual in line with our new procedures and guidelines.

Exercise 2

In the sentences below, identify which preposition works best with the verb, noun, or adjective that precedes it.

1. Kelly is terrified ____ spiders, but has a respect ____ the good things that they do in her garden.
2. I know I should prepare ____ my exam, but I would rather talk ____ the concert this weekend.
3. Ryan has a love ____ teaching, and he wants to work ____ a major university.
4. Matthew said he was angry ____ his brother, but Saturday night he was quite worried ____ him.
5. Even though Henry said he was proud ____ his teammate, but I could tell he was jealous ____ the praise he received from the coach.
6. When I left for work this morning, I had to think ____ whether I remembered my bus pass.

Exercise 3

Using what you have learned about prepositions, explain why the sentences are grammatically incorrect.

1. You can rely me.

2. In the event someone calls, I'll be back during 45 minutes.

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3. He is interested by good books.

4. Jessica camped in Northern Canada for all week.

5. Diana went to home.

6. I served the Navy until March 1999.

Exercise 4

Fill in the following paragraph with the correct prepositions or infinitive forms of the verbs.

I miss being a kid. Now that I am (1) _____ college, I do not get (2) _____ travel (3) _____ summer vacation. Actually, summer is not a vacation at all! If I want (4) _____ graduate (5) _____ four years, I have (6) _____ take classes (7) _____ the summer. Instead of (8) _____ in my brother's footsteps and traveling (9) _____ the country, I will be stuck (10) _____ campus. I get distracted too easily, I spend too much time (11) _____ my friends. We watch TV (12) _____ their living rooms instead of studying. I could spend time (13) _____ the library, but it is so boring! (14) _____ my good intentions (15) _____ the beginning of the semester, I always seem to fall (16) _____. Now I have (17) _____ answer (18) _____ my parents. They are going (19) _____ say, "What are you waiting (20) _____ ? Your classes are not going (21) _____ complete themselves!" I think I will use a planner and a calendar next semester so I do not fall (22) _____. Next summer, I want to travel and not worry about my grades. I guess I am stuck (23) _____ a rock and a hard place.

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Answer Key

Exercise 1

Individual prepositional phrases are underlined in the sentences below. Clusters of prepositional phrases are separated by slashes (/).

1. After visits/ to panda exhibits/ in zoos, many people contribute money to wildlife organizations.
2. China also lends pairs of pandas/ to zoos /around the world.
3. With no route/ to new supplies /of bamboo, many pandas face the possibility of starvation.
4. During a search/ of the Internet, I discovered a breed of dog /with a very interesting history.
5. The ancestors of the American Indian dog /came across the Bering Straits /from Asia /with their Native American masters.
6. I have edited our training manual in line /with our new procedures and guidelines.

Exercise 2

1. of: indicating the relationship between a feeling and an object or person, for: affecting, with regard to
2. for: affecting, with regard to, about: on the subject of
3. of: indicating the relationship between a feeling and an object, at: expressing location or arrival in a particular place
4. with: indicating the manner or an attitude of a person towards someone or something , about: in regards to
5. of: indicating the relationship between a feeling and an object or person, of: indicating the relationship between a feeling and an object or person
6. about: on the subject of

Exercise 3

1. The preposition “on” has been erroneously omitted: “You can rely **on** me.”
2. “During” should be replaced with “in.”
3. “By” should be replaced with “in.”
4. The preposition “for” is unnecessary and should be omitted.
5. The preposition “to” is unnecessary and should be omitted.
6. The preposition “in” has been erroneously omitted: “I served **in** the Navy until March 1999.”

Exercise 4

1. Now that I am in college. (Preposition)
2. I do not get to travel. (Infinitive Verb)
3. during/for summer vacation.(Preposition)
4. If I want to graduate. (Infinitive Verb)
5. If I want graduate in four years,(Preposition)
6. I have to take classes...(InfinitiveVerb)
7. ...take classes over/during the summer. (Preposition)

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8. Instead of following in my... (Preposition) **

** Even though “following” is a conjugation of the verb “to follow,” the way it is used in this context makes it a preposition. It is used to indicate something coming after something else as a result. In this case, the speaker’s desire to replicate his/her brother’s footsteps is an action that results in the brother having done it first. The word “following” usually operates as a preposition, a noun, or an adjective.

9. ...brother’s footsteps and traveling across the country,(Preposition)

10. ...I will be stuck on/in campus. (Preposition)

11. I get distracted too easily, I spend too much time with my friends. (Preposition)

12. We watch TV in their living rooms instead of studying... (Preposition)

13. I could spend time in the library, but it is so boring! (Preposition)

14. Despite my good intentions... (Preposition)

15. ...at/in the beginning of the semester... (Preposition)

16. ...I always seem to fall behind (Preposition)

17. Now I have to answer... (Infinitive Verb)

18. ...to my parents. (Preposition)

19. They are going to say... (Infinitive Verb)

20. “What are you waiting for?” (Preposition)

21. “Your classes are not going to complete themselves!” (Infinitive Verb)

22. I think I will use a planner and a calendar next semester so I do not fall behind. (Preposition)

23. I guess I am stuck between a rock and a hard place. (Preposition)

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