

Help With: Prepositions

Prepositions are words that show relationships between nouns and other words or ideas, usually in time or space.

Some languages show these relationships with post-particles, and others conjugate verbs to indicate direction. The prepositional system in English developed over centuries, and not very consistently. There is sometimes a logical reason why one preposition is used over another, but a new speaker of English will usually find it easier to memorize the exceptions and develop an intuition for recognizing the correct one.



Time

- *On* is used with days
 - I will meet you *on* Saturday.
- *At* is used with noon, night, midnight, and times of day
 - I usually go to sleep *at* midnight.
 - We are eating dinner *at* 6 p.m.
- *In* is used with other times of day, months, years, and seasons
 - Tina likes to take a nap *in* the afternoon.
 - I am going to visit Acapulco *in* May.
 - Las Vegas is very hot *in* the summer.
- Common prepositions of extended time include *since, for, by, from, to, from, until, during, before, and after*.
 - We have been here *since* noon.
 - That means we've been waiting *for* an hour. We expected you to be here *by* 12:30 p.m.
 - Weren't we supposed to meet *from* noon *until* 2 p.m.? Or was it *from* noon *to* 1 p.m.?
 - We expected to see you *during* those hours, not *before* noon and not *after* 2 p.m.



Place

- *In* or *inside* are used for containment.
 - We are sitting *in* the room.
- *Outside* is used for exclusion beyond limits.
 - We live *outside* of the city.
- *On* is used for the surface.
 - I set the pizza *on* the table.
- *At* is used for the general area.
 - Sharon will meet us *at* the university.
- *Over* and *above* are used for higher positions.

- The plane flew *over* the mountains.
- *Below, beneath, under, and underneath* are used for lower locations.
 - Please place the rug *beneath* the chair.
- *Near, by, next to, and close to* are used for proximity.
 - The coffee shop is *near* campus.
- *In front of* is used when the object is on the near or front side.
 - The car is parked *in front of* the store.
- *Behind* is used when the object is on the back side.
 - The garbage cans are *behind* the store.



Direction

- *To* is used for movement toward a goal, as a place or as an action.
 - We are driving *to* California. (the goal is California)
 - We are working *to* pass the test. (the goal is passing the test)
- *Toward* is used in a similar manner as *to*. *To* generally refers to a specific location, *toward* to a general direction.
 - We are driving *toward* Los Angeles but not *to* Los Angeles.



Difficult Prepositions

Remember that time uses many different prepositions in English.

- We will meet *at* 5 pm *on* the first Sunday *in* June. I was born *in* 1978.

Exact time: *at*. Days & dates: *on*. Months & years: *in*.

Students should also be aware of some strange prepositional expressions used in slang.

- I am so *into* that movie star! (fascinated with)
- I am *on to* you! (I understand your trick or secret)
- She was *at* him constantly to do it. (nagging or aggressively asking)
- I am *over* her. (I no longer miss her)
- We came *across* a problem (We met a problem by accident)
- I am *on top* of it. (I am in control of it)



Placement

This short handout cannot explain all the details of placement, but notice that prepositions almost never go to the end of the sentence. Avoid these statements:

- Where are you going to?
- When is it at?
- Where is it at?