

Prepositions

Prepositions are “little” words that express the relationships between words or concepts in your sentence. Common prepositions include: **at, on, in, of, to, from, and about**.

Some prepositions, like those related to space and direction, are relatively easy to understand. Others, though, are more conceptual, even idiomatic in their usage. Adding to the difficulty, is having to remember which prepositions must be used in combination with certain verbs. Confused writers often choose arbitrarily or omit the entirely, but using the wrong preposition can distort meaning.

What follows is a list of some prepositions and their most common usage.

Prepositions Conveying Time

Preposition	Description	Example
At	at a specific time	<i>At</i> 9:00, the bell rang.
On	on a specific day or date	My birthday is <i>on</i> June 4.
In	part of a 24 hour period	I did my homework <i>in</i> the evening.
By	by a specific time/date	My paper is due tomorrow <i>by</i> noon.

Prepositions Conveying Place

Preposition	Description	Example
At	at a place at the edge of something at the corner at a target	Meet me <i>at</i> the restaurant. We were sitting <i>at</i> the bar. The bus stopped <i>at</i> the corner <i>of</i> 4 th and 11 th She threw the dart <i>at</i> the bullseye.
On	on a surface on a street on an electric medium	The cat sat <i>on</i> the table. I live <i>on</i> University Avenue. He appeared <i>on</i> the 9:00 news.
In	in an enclosed space in a geographic location in a print medium	The light is on <i>in</i> the bathroom. It is cold <i>in</i> Minnesota. The birth announcement was <i>in</i> the paper.
By	by a landmark	The tour goes <i>by</i> the Wellness Center.
Of	of a material of a kind	The moon is made <i>of</i> cheese. He is one <i>of</i> the faculty members.
From	from a specific place from a place of origin. from a source	I just came <i>from</i> the gym. I am <i>from</i> Bismark, North Dakota. He quoted <i>from</i> the Bible.
About	about a place about to do something about time	The papers were scattered <i>about</i> the room. I'm <i>about</i> the clean my room. It's <i>about</i> 3:00 in the afternoon.
To	to a place to a degree	I went <i>to</i> court. We'll have to compromise <i>to</i> some degree.

Choosing the Correct Preposition: Some Strategies

Look for Patterns: some prepositions express conceptual meanings that follow consistent patterns.

Example: **from** can carry the idea of *not* doing something

They were **restricted from** entering. (They did not enter.)

to has a positive sense of engagement, of doing something

They were **restricted to** the lobby. (They stayed in the lobby.)

Investigate the Verb: some prepositions are closely associated with certain verbs, so if you don't know which preposition to use, look up the verb in a dictionary. Also, remember that the meaning may change, depending on which preposition you choose.

Example: Run into We ran into him at the mall, what a pleasant surprise!

Run out We ran out of coffee – can somebody buy more?

Run up We ran up a high bill and didn't have enough cash.

Remember “To Be”: some verb-preposition combinations must be used in the following pattern: be + past participle (-ed ending) + preposition

Examples: be accustomed to, be composed of, be interested in

Consider Alternatives: in addition to choosing the correct preposition, keep in mind that most verb-preposition combinations are considered informal: they are used more often in conversation than in writing. Thus, an easy way to increase the academic formality of your writing is to choose one-word alternatives whenever possible.

Examples: **Informal** **More formal**

hand in submit

look into investigate

put off delay

Keep a List: there are so many verb-preposition combinations that it would be difficult to memorize them all. Try keeping an ongoing list of expressions used frequently in your field or that you have difficulty remembering.