

A GUIDE TO PREPOSITIONS

Though over 100 prepositions exist in our vocabulary, few English speakers think about the rules of prepositions. **Prepositions** are a class of words that show relationships to space, time, or ideas. In formal writing, prepositions are followed by a noun, a pronoun, or a noun phrase—this makes a prepositional phrase. Prepositional phrases give the audience more detail and show logical thought.

Prepositional phrases give additional information and can be constructed in many different ways. **Warning:** they can be confused with conjunctions, adverbs, and infinitives.

HOW TO USE PREPOSITIONS

1. **Prepositions show spatial, chronological, or logical relationships** – This may be a literal or figurative relationship.

Ex. She placed the note *under* her mattress.

Ex. *Out of* respect for the professor, we use the prefix ‘Dr.’

2. **Prepositions appear at the end of a sentence in informal writing** – Though ending a sentence with a preposition is not incorrect in informal writing, consider rewording your sentence to choose what Williams and Colomb (2010) call the “elegant option” (p. 20).

Informal: School is the thing she cares most *about*.

Formal: School is the thing she cares *about* the most.

Formal: She cares *about* school more than anything.

3. **Prepositions can become other parts of speech** – Some words act as prepositions in some contexts and other types of words in other contexts. Know the difference:

- a. **Conjunctions** – Words like *after*, *since*, *before*, and *until* are prepositions when they come before a noun phrase and conjunctions when they come before a clause (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Conjunction: I baked her a pie *since* she was so kind to me.

Preposition: The phone has been ringing off the hook *since* yesterday.

- b. **Adverbs** – Words like *around*, *before*, *beyond*, *through*, and *under* act as prepositions when they have an object and adverbs when they do not (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). The object will be a noun, pronoun, or noun phrase.

Adverb: We were just passing *through*.

Preposition: Just walk *through* the door.

- c. **The infinitive *to*** – In a sentence, the infinitive version of a verb may come with the word *to* as a marker. The infinitive *to* will be followed by a verb while the preposition *to* will be followed by a noun, pronoun, or noun phrase.

Infinitive: She wanted *to* drive.

Preposition: She walked *to* the bus stop.

4. **Remove unnecessary prepositions** – Many times, extra prepositions end up at the end of sentences and make the writing sound quite conversational.
- ✗ I don't know where that book went *to*.
5. **Remove unnecessary prepositional phrases** – In attempt to provide plenty of detail, many students include too many or too-long prepositional phrases. Now that you know how to use them, keep it concise!
- ✗ The knowledge *of* scientists does not yet reach *to* the exact number *of* stars *in* the entirety *of* the universe.
 - ✓ Scientists do not yet know how many stars are *in* the universe.

PRACTICE NOW

COMMON PREPOSITIONS

SINGLE-WORD PREPOSITIONS

about	above	across	after	against	along
among	around	as	at	before	behind
below	beneath	beside	between	beyond	by
despite	down	during	except	for	from
in	inside	into	like	near	of
off	on	onto	opposite	out	outside
over	past	round	since	than	through
to	towards	under	underneath	unlike	until
up	upon	via	with	within	without

Adapted from *Prepositions*, by Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.).

MULTIPLE-WORD PREPOSITIONS

ahead of	apart from	as for	as well as	because of
due to	except for	in addition to	in front of	in spite of
inside of	instead of	near to	on account of	on top of
out of	outside of	such as	thanks to	up to

Adapted from *Prepositions*, by Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.).

References

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