

WHAT ARE PREPOSITIONS?

The article deals with the problem of the use of prepositions and their role in the English language.

Keyword: prepositions, the role of prepositions in English, the function.

ЧТО ТАКОЕ ПРЕДЛОГ?

В статье рассматриваются проблемы использования предлогов и их роль в английском языке.

Ключевые слова: предлоги, роль предлогов в английском языке, функция.

Prepositions are a minor word class. They serve to connect major words (usually nouns) to other parts of the sentence. Some prepositions also belong to other classes (eg adverbs, conjunctions, even adjectives). But prepositions are ‘closed classes in the sense that we do not invent new single-word prepositions.

Form

Prepositions are not distinguished from other word classes by any characteristic form and they are not inflected.

There is a group of frequently used and mainly short words (eg up/down), that can be both prepositions and adverbs. Some grammarians label these words; however they are functioning, as particles. Or the term ‘adverb particle’ (or prepositional adverb) is used when the words are functioning as adverbs: Other grammarians use the term ‘particle’ to cover a bigger range of short words stretching from conjunctions (eg and) to interjections (eg oh). Here we mainly stick to the traditional labels of adverb and preposition, but also use the term particle to indicate words that are both.

A number of two- and three-word phrases behave like simple prepositions. They are marginally ‘open-class’; because new combinations could perhaps be formed. The term ‘complex preposition’ is given to such phrases (eg in spite of). This must be distinguished from the term ‘prepositional phrase’ which means a preposition + complement, usually a noun phrase — eg <in the garden>.

Position/function

The name ‘preposition’ (= ‘place before’) obviously indicates a word preceding another word (or words), usually a noun or noun phrases.

There are important exceptions to this position rule, but prepositions are always closely linked syntactically to another word - and this is one way in which they differ from adverbs. For example the word in is a preposition in (a) and an adverb in (b):

(a) <Why are you standing in the garden?>

(b) <Please come in>

Meaning

(a) A major use of prepositions is to relate things or people in various ways in place and time. Many common prepositions apply to both place and time, with very similar meanings show some of these place and time prepositions shows prepositions mainly of place only shows prepositions mainly of time only.

(b) Some of these place/time prepositions carry over much of their meaning into figurative uses, though some have other meanings as well. There are also some common prepositions (eg with, of) that do not have place or time meanings deals with all these.

These tables do not attempt to list all the various usages of prepositions — which can be found in a good dictionary. Rather, the tables attempt to indicate the basic meaning of each preposition, from which the other (apparently different) meanings derive. This is not to claim that the ‘correct’ preposition in a particular context is always obvious, but at least in many cases usage may be understandable.

Prepositions		Adverbs	
A	B	C	
Place & time	Place		
1 at	(away) from	—	away
to		(to)	
2 on	off	on	off
on (to)			
3 in	out of	in	out
in (to)			

Examples (place only)

- Is Mrs Smith *at* home?
No. She's gone *away*. [adv]
I saw her drive *away from* here this morning.
She's gone *to* London.
- My watch was *on* the table. But it fell *off*. [adv]
It fell *off* the table, and *on to* the floor.
- My money was *in* my bag. Who's taken it *out*? [adv]
Has anyone taken it *out of* my bag and put it *in(to)* their pocket?

Here we have nine closely related prepositions:

A Three pairs of words all used for both place and time: at/to; on/on(to); in/in(to). In each pair, the first word (at, on, in) on the whole represents static location or time, and the second word represents direction (whether in space or time). On to (or onto) is mainly place.

B Three related prepositions of contrary direction (away from, off, out of). These mainly refer to place, except from which has both place and time uses.

C Related adverbs. At is never an adverb, and to only exceptionally (see phrasal verbs).

Meanings of these nine prepositions

at — Points

at, on, in (mainly static)

Place

at home, at school, at the cinema

at the Hilton, at the Red Lion, at Tom's

at the front, at the back We live at the sea, at the seaside.

The train doesn't stop at Glynde.

I'll meet you at Victoria Station.

at the North Pole

on — Lines, surfaces, areas (Place); Time similarly seen as having surface but not interior

on the floor/the table/the wall,

on a stool, on a hard chair on the cover, on page 10 on a main road.

on the river on the South Coast on the M1. (motorway)

Henley-on-Thames,

Leigh-on-Sea on an is]and

on Earth. on the Equator a spot on my chin

Time

at one o'clock, at 5.15pm. at dawn, at sunset, at midnight, at night at the weekend (Brit Eng)

at Christmas, at the New Year [periods seen as points on calendar]

at the beginning, at the end, at first, at last

at this point, at that time, at times, at any moment at a glance love at first sight

He wrote his first novel at the age of 60.

on Sunday, on 23rd April on that date, on that occasion on the weekend (Am Eng) on the morning of 23rd April on Sunday afternoon on Christmas Day Please be on time. [exactly]

On opening the letter, he found a cheque inside. [Action seen as whole, with no 'interior']

in — 3-dimensional enclosing spaces. Time also seen as having interior

in the cupboard/the garden/the forest
in the North of England in London, in Cambridgeshire, in America
in heaven, hell, the sky in the world, in the Tropics They live in a little village called Glynde.
in this book, in an armchair in the front/back row a pain in my throat

in April, in 1980, in the winter in Easter Week
in the 19th century in the morning, the afternoon, the evening
Five minutes in every hour He went round the world in 80 days.
I'll be back in ten minutes.
Please be in time. [early enough — before the end of some implied period] in the end [eventually] never in all my life
In opening the letter, he unfortunately tore the stamps I wanted. [Action with 'interior' time dimension — in the middle of opening the letter]

to, from, on to, off, into, out of (mainly direction)

to — Goal

Place
We're going to Scotland.

Time

The exhibition is open (from Monday) to Saturday.

Only 300 more shopping days to Christmas!

It's five to four. [opposite = past in Brit Eng and after in Am Eng]

She lived abroad from the age of 7.

The exhibition is open from Monday (to Saturday).

I'll be here from midday.

from — Source, starting point

We've already driven from Land's End.

We're going from Land's End to John O'Groats.

I bought these souvenirs back from Spain.

on to — Surface & goal

The cup fell on to the floor.

I can't fix this shelf on to the wall.

He walked on to the platform.

off — Separation from surface

It fell off the wall. Keep off the grass.

into — Interior & goal

I went into the library.

The child climbed into the (branches of the) tree.

He camelhurried/ran/rushed/walked/went into the room.

This will take us into the nineteen-nineties.

Will the railways survive into the 21st century?

:

out of — Separation from interior

The dog jumped out of its basket.

My purse must have fallen out of my handbag.

Take your cigarette out of your mouth.

(a) at, on, in We use.

at for points of place and time (seen as having no dimension); on for lines and surfaces of place, and similarly for time — having as it were area but no interior (ie two-dimensional); in for three-dimensional *spaces* and for time having 'interior'.

In general terms this means that we tend to use in for large places (eg America) and at for places seen as points (the North Pole). Sometimes we have a choice depending on our viewpoint: They live at Glynde [a point on a map] or in Glynde [a village of some dimension]. We can stay at or in the Hilton

Hotel. We can park a car in or on the road. But often there is no choice: We live on a river [a line], but swim in it (three-dimensional water]. We live at the seaside [the point where land and sea meet], but on the South Coast [a line]. With time, choice of preposition is more limited than with place.

(b) To and from; on *to* and *off*; *into* and *out of* are often pairs with contrasting meanings.

(c) In/into and on/onto As a rough rule, into and on to have a meaning of goal like to that on and in lack. So directional movements prefer into and on to. But with some verbs of movement in or on are possible:

<Go and jump in the lake!> (d) *From* (and *since*). Both from [prep) and since (prep, adv & conj) give a time for the beginning of an activity, but from gives no indication of the end of the activity, whereas since links the action to the moment of speaking or to some specified past time. Since therefore normally needs a (present or past) perfect tense. Contrast:

<He { had studied
studied
(?has studied) } English from the age of 10.>
<He { has studied English since 1970.> [and still does]
{ had studied English since 1970.> [The situation at some
past time]
<* He studied since . . .>

Omission of prepositions with some time expressions

At/on/in are not normally used before the following types of time expression:

1 next last this that each every } Tuesday January week month year	2 any all some } day afternoon	4 one day last week
	3 tomorrow yesterday } morning afternoon evening	5 the day } after tomorrow before yesterday the week } before last after next
6 last tomorrow } night		

More prepositions of place

across

[direction, path
crossways]

They live across the road from us.

Don't run across the road.

There's a footbridge across the river.

along

[direction, path
lengthways]

A tree has fallen across the path.

It's too muddy to walk across the fields.

There are trees along the road, and a path along the river.

We walked along the river bank for three miles.

Where's the lavatory? Along the corridor.

among +

more than two things/people
seen asan undivided
surrounding group

I don't like living among strangers.

a little village among the mountains.

Silver is highly prized among the tribesmen.

between you and me and the gatepost!

between +

Bexhill is between Eastbourne and Hastings.

two or more surrounding (or
partly surrounding)
things/people, all seen
separately

Time:

up [movement, direction;
sometimes higher)

Time:

down [movement, direction;
sometimes lower]

Time:

above

[higher, no intrinsic contact or
movement]

below [lower, no intrinsic con
tact or movement]

Compare

metaphorical use

Air New Zealand fly between New Zealand, the Pacific
Islands, Singapore and the U.S.A.

between 3.15 and 4 pm

between May and September.

You're driving me up the wall!

The train wound slowly up the mountainside. There's a fish and chip shop
up the road. up until 1939/up to 1939

(But not * up 1939/up the centuries etc)

It's easier walking down the hill. [than walking up it.] There's a fish and
chip shop down the road. .down the ages/the centuries

500 feet above sea level

Windsor is on the River Thames above London.

The mountains tower above the town.

We were flying above the clouds.

They live three floors above us.

He's got a plaster above his eye. [on his forehead]

The Dead Sea is below sea level.

Greenwich is on the Thames below London.

The post office is up the hill below the church.

The people below us are very noisy. [under, underneath
possible]

His leg was amputated below the knee.

She's above/below him in class/in the firm/in ability.

Ten degrees above/below freezing point.

I can't go above/below J50. (raise/drop my price)

above/below average

We flew over France (to Italy).

Alfriston is over the hill. [You have to take a path from here to the other
side.]

They are building a new bridge over the river. [across possible]

They live over the road. [on the other side] They live over a shop. [above
possible] The dog's run all over the flowerbeds. Put your coat over the
chair.

He had a plaster over his eye. [covering it] over Easter/over the
weekend/over the years The police station is under the bridge. [perhaps
actually beneath the arches, or perhaps via a path through to the other

side]

They're building a tunnel under the Channel. The people in the flat under us are noisy. (below, underneath, possible]

The dog ran under the chair. I've got a scar under my chin. He's over them. (= He's the boss.) He's got twenty people under him.

Over under J20, over/under 40 [years old] over/under 30 degrees

over age/over ripe [= too old etc

under age underdone/underdeveloped (= not enough]

There's a huge cellar beneath/underneath the house. [under possible]

Put a pillow underneath/beneath his head. [under possible]

The chair broke beneath his weight. [under possible] beneath contempt/beneath one's dignity -

Why are your shoes on top of the cupboard?

The castle is on top of the hill

Put your bicycle against the wall.

You're banging your head against a brick wall!

It was a war against a ruthless enemy.

They were all against him. [Contrast for 10.181

The child ran and hid behind a tree.

I hate driving behind a bus.

There's a big garden behind the house.

His family were right behind him.

The people in front of us at the cinema were eating peanuts. Please don't park in front of the entrance.

There's a block of flats opposite our house.

If you sit opposite me, it's easier to talk than if we sit next to each other.

Come and sit beside me.

There's a noisy disco right beside our house.

She was standing just inside the door. [ie inside the doorway/room house etc]

It as very dark inside the cave.

What's life like inside a prison?

There are always a lot of jeans on rails outside the shop.

Outside the hotel, the temperature was below freezing.

beneath underneath

[lower, contact possible, vertical relationship] Compare metaphorical use of beneath:

on top of

[higher, with contact]

against

[proximity, contact]

Also metaphorical use [opposed]

behind [rear of something three-dimensional]

Also metaphorical use

[supporting]

in front of

[antonym of behind and related to 3-D object]

opposite [facing]

beside

[at the side of 3-D object]

inside

[interior of 3-D

object

outside

(exterior of 3-D object]

More prepositions of time

after	after breakfast
[subsequent to, later than]	the day after tomorrow
before	ten after six [Am Eng; Br Eng = ten-past six]
[prior to, earlier than]	before dinner
Place (in lists)	the week before last before now/before then
	P is before Q.
	My name comes after yours.
since	since the war
[in the period	since 1975
beginning; links to a	since the age of 10
later point — but	since the beginning of time
neutral about ending	
of activity]	The good weather lasted till until the end of October.
till until	He lived in Wales till/until his death.
[extended period	I'll wait till/until 5 o'clock.
with end but without	I didn't see them till/until yesterday.
mention of	.
beginning]	I've only seen them once during the past year. [in also
during	possible]
[located in time, but	Where do the birds go during the winter? [or in]
not extent]	I must wash the car (some time) during the weekend.
	Contrast: I'll be busy throughout the weekend. [extent]

Several common prepositions have time reference only, not place:

(a) Before and after can be used with meanings of place, but this is rare, except in lists as shown. Place equivalents are in front of and behind (10.16). Notice that till/until are similarly time only (contrast to). (b) Before and since are also adverbs.

(c) All these words are also conjunctions except during.

Extended meanings + with, of

Most prepositions of place and time have figurative meanings, often closely related to their literal meanings. A few examples are given in 10.18.

Here we give some further examples to distinguish sets of words that cause confusion. Notice with and of — two important prepositions, that do not have either time or place meanings.

A at/to/for

At/to Both have a sense of goal, but at sometimes has an additional sense of 'target', often combined with a feeling of aggression. If you throw something at someone, you hope to hit them; if you throw it to them, you hope they will catch it. (For verbs taking to or for as an alternative to indirect object pattern

at Don't aim your gun at me. [goal/target] Don't laugh at me.

Don't throw stones at the dog.

Stop talking at me. [lecturing me unpleasantly]

Please look at me.

to Please pass that book to me.

[goal/destination] Throw the ball to the dog.

Please talk to me/listen to me.

You ought to give some money to charity.

To/for Both have a sense of destination, but with for the destination is sometimes intended rather than achieved. Compare place: <go to Brighton> <set out for Brighton>. For I bought a book for Tom. [but possibly forgot to give it to him] [intended destination! I have been listening for the postman. [but I haven't heard purpose; in favor of] him] Let's go for a walk/prepare for an exam/pray for peace hope for the best. Too much sugar is bad for you. I'm saving for a car. We're all for it. [Contrast against]

B by/with/from

The main meaning of by (other than place and time) is means/agent. It is the main preposition for the agent in passive structures.

by Gravity was discovered by Newton.

[agent] The climbers were struck by lightning. The President was shot by an assassin.

These photographs were taken by a child.

[means) She keeps healthy by jogging every day. It happened by accident/chance.

We came by car/train.

with a girl with red hair [having, Come with us!

accompanying] She lives with her mother.

We're with you. [on your side. Compare for)

This pudding is made with eggs [and other ingredients]

My coat is covered with mud.

[instrument] He was shot with an automatic. [Contrast <by a gunman>] These photographs were taken with (or on) a cheap camera. [Contrast <by a child>]

from The best sugar comes from cane.

[source, origin] The table was made from a single tree trunk. Here's a letter from my sister.

I've just bought a second-hand car from a friend.

[cause] He's suffering from exhaustion.

[separation) I was prevented from coming.

Its different from the others.

C about/on

In their place/time meanings, about has somewhat vague connotations, while on relates to a definite line or surface. This difference carries over into other subject matter.

about [vague, in general]

on [more definite! serious)

Can we talk about something cheerful for a change?

He told me about his illness.

I'm writing a popular book about birds and bees.

I hope to write the definitive book on the subject.

She wrote a thesis on the chemistry of molecules.

D of

Of is the commonest of all prepositions, and sometimes seems to have little meaning beyond grammatical linking (eg h). However a variety of meanings can be seen.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| (a) possession/have | the wealth of these people!
the end of the road, the key of the cupboard |
| (b) subjective genitive | the arrival of the plane [The plane arrived.] the novels of Graham Greene (G.G. writes novels) the cost of a new roof [A new roof costs . . .] |
| (c) objective genitive | this waste of good food. [Someone is wasting . . . the pursuit of happiness (People pursue . . .)] |
| (d) being (and apposition) | The Isle of Skye [Skye an island], the City of Bath the sense of taste
It is kind of you to . . . [You are kind] to die of cancer/old age |
| (e) cause, source, origin | the cause of . . ./the result of .
This necklace is made of solid gold. [It is solid gold]
Contrast: The table is made from a tree trunk. [virtually nothing else, but is not a tree trunk now] |
| (f) containing | and contrast:
The cake is made with brandy. [and a lot of other ingredients] |
| (g) quantities | a cup of tea, a bag of peanuts, a bottle of milk, a book of short stories, |
| (h) some determiner structures | the Gang of Four a pint of milk, a kilo of sugar, a piece of paper
some of the people [compare g], both of the books etc |

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