



A Guide to Using Prepositions

Prepositions are among the basic parts of speech. This handout will help you understand how to use prepositions more effectively.

Definition: A preposition connects a noun or pronoun to another part of the sentence.

Prepositional Phrases: Taken together, a preposition and its object—the noun or pronoun linked to the sentence—are called a prepositional phrase.

Example: I am walking to the store.

Note: “To the store” is a prepositional phrase: “to” is the preposition, and “store” is its object.

These prepositions are among the most commonly used words in English:

about, above, across, after, against, along, among, around, at, before, behind, below, beneath, beside, beyond, by, down, during, except, for, from, in, inside, into, near, of, off, on, onto, out, outside, over, past, through, throughout, to, toward, under, underneath, until, up, upon, via, with, without

Common Uses

Prepositional phrases usually assume the role of an adjective or adverb.

Prepositions as Adjectives

Adjectives modify nouns. They answer the questions “Which one?” “What kind?” and “How many?” A prepositional phrase can also modify a noun in this way.

Example: Use the door *in the back*.

Note: “In the back” is a prepositional phrase modifying “door.” Like an adjective, it answers the question “Which one?” Which door? The one in the back.

Example: I recently read a study *about climate change*.

Note: “About climate change” is a prepositional phrase modifying “study.” Like an adjective, it answers the question, “What kind?” What kind of study? The one about climate change.

Additionally, prepositions function like a possessive adjective, answering the question “Whose?”

Example: I took a photo *of the family*.

Note: “Of the family” is a prepositional phrase modifying “photo.” Like a possessive adjective, it

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answers the question “Whose?” Whose photo? The one of the family.

Prepositions as Adverbs

Adverbs have several roles: they modify verbs, they modify adjectives, and they modify other adverbs. They answer the questions “How?” “Why?” “When?” and “Where?” A prepositional phrase can also function in this way.

Example: The bird landed *on my head*.

Note: “On my head” is a prepositional phrase modifying the verb “landed.” Like an adverb, it answers the question “Where?” Where did the bird land? On my head.

Example: I will wake up *in the morning*.

Note: “In the morning” is a prepositional phrase modifying the verb “wake up.” Like an adverb, it answers the question “When?” When will I wake up? In the morning.

Example: She jogs *through the park*.

Note: “Through the park” is a prepositional phrase modifying the verb “jogs.” As an adverb, it answers the question “Where?” Where does she jog? Through the park.

Common Errors

Misplacement

Like any modifier, prepositional phrases are considered misplaced if it is unclear which element in a sentence they modify.

Incorrect: She saw an exhibit about a woman who was imprisoned in the gallery.

Note: In this example, it is not clear if “in the gallery” modifies “imprisoned,” “saw,” or “exhibit.”

Incorrect: He ate the sandwich *in his swimsuit*.

Note: In this example, it is not clear if “in his swimsuit” modifies “ate” or “sandwich.”

There are two quick ways to fix a misplaced prepositional phrase: either move the phrase closer to the element it modifies or express the thought in something besides a prepositional phrase.

Correct: She saw an exhibit in the gallery about a woman who was imprisoned.

Correct: He ate the sandwich *while wearing his swimsuit*.

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Overuse

Too many prepositional phrases can clog a sentence. Reduce as many phrases as you can.

Wordy: After the 1-7 loss of Brazil to Germany in the 2014 World Cup, people demonstrated in the streets.

Concise: Street demonstrations followed Brazil's 1-7 loss to Germany in the 2014 World Cup.

Eliminate prepositions by using possessives, adjectives, and adverbs.

Wordy: The opinion of the client matters.

Concise: The client's opinion matters.

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