

## 9 Prepositions

### 86 Introduction

Prepositions are words normally placed **before** nouns or pronouns (but see 87 about possible alternative positions). Prepositions can also be followed by verbs **but**, except after **but** and **except**, the verb must be in the gerund form:

*He is talking of emigrating.*

*They succeeded in escaping.*

The student has two main problems with prepositions. He has to know (a) whether in any construction a preposition is required or not, and (b) which preposition to use when one is required.

The first problem can be especially troublesome to a European student, who may find that a certain construction in his own language requires a preposition, whereas a similar one in English does not, and vice versa: e.g. in most European languages purpose is expressed by a preposition + infinitive; in English it is expressed by the infinitive only:

*I came here to study.*

The student should note also that many words used mainly as prepositions can also be used as conjunctions and adverbs. Where this is the case it will be pointed out in the following paragraphs.

### 87 Alternative position of prepositions

*A Prepositions normally precede nouns or pronouns. In two constructions, however, it is possible in informal English to move the preposition to the end of the sentence:*

In questions beginning with a preposition + whom/which/what/whose/where:

*To whom were you talking?* (formal)

*Who were you talking to?* (informal)

*In which drawer does he keep it?* (formal)

*Which drawer does he keep it in?* (informal)

It used to be thought ungrammatical to end a sentence with a preposition, but it is now accepted as a colloquial form. Similarly in relative clauses, a preposition placed before whom/which (can be moved to the end of the clause. The relative pronoun is then often omitted:

*the people with whom I was travelling* (formal)

*the people I was travelling with* (informal)

*the company from which I hire my TV set* (formal)

*the company I hire my TV set from* (informal)

B But in phrasal verbs the preposition/adverb remains after its verb, so the formal type of construction is not possible, *the children I was looking after* could not be rewritten with *after + whom* and *Which bridge did they blow up?* could not be rewritten with *up + which*.

### 88 Omission of to and for before indirect objects

A1 A sentence such as *I gave the book to Tom* could also be expressed *I gave Tom the book*, i.e. the indirect object can be placed first and the preposition **to** omitted. We can use this construction with the following verbs: *bring, give, hand, lease* (in a will), *lend, offer, pass* (= hand), *pay, play* (an instrument/piece of music), *promise, sell, send, show, sing, take, tell* (= narrate, inform):

*I showed the map to Bill = I showed Bill the map.*

*They sent £5 to Mr Smith = They sent Mr Smith £5.*

2 Similarly I'll find a job for Ann could be expressed I'll find Ann a job (*putting the indirect object first and omitting for*). This construction is possible after *book, build, buy, cook, (bake, boil, fry etc.), fetch, find, get, keep, knit, leave, make, order, reserve:*

*I'll get a drink for you = I'll get you a drink.*

*I bought a book for James = I bought James a book.*

B Normally either construction can be used. But:

1 The construction without preposition is preferred when the direct object is a phrase or a clause:

*Tell her the whole story.*

*Show me what you've got in your hand.*

2 The construction with preposition is preferred:

(a) When the indirect object is a phrase or a clause:

*We kept seats for everyone on our list/for everyone who had paid.*

*I had to show my pass to the man at the door.*

(b) When the direct object is **it** or **them**. Sentences such as *They kept it for Mary, She made them for Bill, We sent it to George* cannot be expressed by a verb + noun + pronoun construction.

If the indirect object is also a pronoun (*I sent it to him*) it is sometimes possible to reverse the pronouns and omit *to* (*I sent him it*), but this cannot be done with *for* constructions and is better avoided.

This restriction does not apply to other pronoun objects:

*He gave Bill some.*

*He didn't give me any.*

*He bought Mary one.*

*I'll show you something.*

C *promise, show, tell* can be used with indirect objects only, without *to*:

*promise us      show him      tell him*

*read, write* can be used similarly, but require *to*:

*read to me      write to them*

*play, sing* can be used with *to* or *for*:

*play to us      play for us      sing to us      sing for us*

## 89 Use and omission of *to* with verbs of communication

Verbs of command, request, invitation and advice, e.g. *advise, ask, beg, command, encourage, implore, invite, order, recommend, remind, request, tell, urge, warn*, can be followed directly by the person addressed (without *to*) + infinitive:

*They advised him to wait.*

*I urged her to try again.* (See 244.)

The person addressed (without *to*) can be used after *advise, remind, tell, warn* with other constructions also:

*He reminded them that there were no trains after midnight.*

*They warned him that the ice was thin/warned him about the ice*

But note that *recommend* (= *advise*) when used with other constructions needs *to* before the person addressed:

*He recommended me to buy it* but *He recommended it to me.*

*He recommended me (for the post)* would mean 'He said I was suitable'.

When **ask** is used with other constructions the person addressed is often optional. The preposition *to* is never used here:

*He asked (me) a question.*

*He asked (me) if I wanted to apply.*

*She asked (her employer) for a day off.*

*call* (= shout), *complain, describe, explain, grumble, murmur, mutter, say, shout, speak, suggest, talk, whisper* need **to** before the person addressed, though it is not essential to mention this person:

*Peter complained (to her) about the food.*

*She said nothing (to her parents).*

*He spoke English (to them).*

*shout at* can be used when the subject is angry with the other person:

*He shouted at me to get out of his way.*

compare with *He shouted to me* which means he raised his voice because I was at a distance.

## 90 Time and date: *at, on, by, before, in*

A **at, on**

**at** a time:

*at dawn   at six   at midnight   at 4.30 .*

**at** an age:

*at sixteen/at the age of sixteen*

*She got married at seventeen.*

**on** a day/date:

on Monday      on 4 June      on Christmas Day

Exceptions

at night

at Christmas, at Easter (the period, not the day only)

on the morning/afternoon/evening/night of a certain date:

*We arrived on the morning of the sixth.*

It is also, of course, possible to say:

*this/next Monday etc., any Monday, one Monday*

**B by, before**

**by** a time/date/period = at that time or before/not later than that date. It often implies 'before that time/date':

*The train starts at 6.10, so you had better be at the station by 6.00.*

**by** + a time expression is often used with a perfect tense, particularly the future perfect (see 216):

*By the end of July I'll have read all those books.*

**before** can be preposition, conjunction or adverb:

*Before signing this . . .* (preposition)

*Before you sign this . . .* (conjunction)

*I've seen him somewhere before.* (adverb) (See 195 B, 342.)

**C on time, in time, in good time**

**on time** = at the time arranged, not before, not after:

The 8.15 train started on time. (It started at 8.15.)

**in time/in time for** + noun = not late; in good time (for) = with a comfortable margin:

*Passengers should be in time for their train.*

*I arrived at the concert hall in good time (for the concert).* (Perhaps the concert began at 7:30 and I arrived at 7:15.)

**D on arrival, on arriving, on reaching, on getting to**

**on arrival/on arriving, he . . .** = when he arrives/arrived, he ...

**on** can also be used similarly with the gerund of certain other verbs (chiefly verbs of information):

*On checking, she found that some of the party didn't know the way.*

*On hearing/Hearing that the plane had been diverted, they left the airport.*

The **on** in the last sentence could be omitted. (See 277.)

**E at the beginning/end, in the beginning/end, at first/at last**

**at the beginning (of)/at the end (of)** = literally at the beginning/end:

*At the beginning of a book there is often a table of contents.*

*At the end there may be an index.*

**in the beginning/at first** = in the early stages. It implies that later on there was a change:

*In the beginning/At first we used hand tools. Later we had machines.*

**in the end/at last** = eventually/after some time:

*At first he opposed the marriage, but in the end he gave his consent.*

**91 Time: from, since, for, during**

**from**, since and for

**from** is normally used with **to** or **till/until**:

*Most people work from nine to five*

**from** can also be used of place:

*Where do you come from?*

**since** is used for time, never for place, and means 'from that time to the time referred to'. It is often used with a present perfect or past perfect tense (see 185-8, 194).

*He has been here since Monday, (from Monday till now)*

*He wondered where Ann was. He had not seen her since their quarrel.*

**since** can also be an adverb (see 37, 185-8):

*He left school in 1983. I haven't seen him since.*

**since** can also be a conjunction of time:

*He has worked for us ever since he left school.*

*It is two years since I last saw Tom = last saw Tom two years ago/I haven't seen Tom for two years.*

(For since with other types of clause, see 338.)

**for** is used of a period of time: **for six years, for two months, for ever:**

*Bake it/or two hours.*

*He traveled in the desert for six months.*

For + a period of time can be used with a present perfect tense or past perfect tense for an action which extends up to the time of speaking:

*He has worked here for a year.* (He began working here a year ago and still works here.)

**for** used in this way is replaceable by **since** with the point in time when the action began:

*He has worked here since this time last year.*

**during** and **for**

**during** is used with known periods of time, i.e. periods known by name, such as Christmas, Easter or periods which have been already refilled:

*during the Middle Ages during 1941*

*during the summer (of that year)*

*during his childhood*

*during my holidays*

The action can either last the whole period or occur at some time within period:

*It rained all Monday but stopped raining during the night.* (at some point of time)

*He was ill for a week, and during that week he ate nothing.*

**for** (indicating purpose) may be used before known periods:

*I went there/I hired a car/I rented a house for my holidays/for the summer.*

**for** has various other uses:

*He asked for £5. I paid £1 for it.*

*I bought one for Tom.* (See 88.)

**for** can also be a conjunction and introduce a clause (see 330).

## 92 Time: **to, till/until, after, afterwards** (adverb)

A **to** and **till/until**

**to** can be used of time and place; **till/until** of time only.

We can use **from ... to** or **from ... till/until**:

*They worked from five to ten/from five till ten.* (at five to ten would mean 'at 9:55')

But if we have no from we use till/until, not to:

*Let's start now and work till dark.* (to would not be possible here.)

**till/until** is often used with a negative verb to emphasize lateness:

*We didn't get home till 2 a.m.*

*He usually pays me on Friday but last week he didn't pay me till the following Monday.*

**till/until** is very often used as a conjunction of time:

*We'll stay here till it stops raining.*

*Go on till you come to the level crossing.*

But note that if 'you come to' is omitted, the till must be replaced by to:

*Go on to the level crossing.*

**B after and afterwards** (adverb)

**after** (preposition) must be followed by a noun, pronoun or gerund:

*Don't bathe immediately after a meal/after eating.*

*Don't have a meal and bathe immediately after it.*

If we do not wish to use a noun/pronoun or gerund, we cannot use **after**, but must use

**afterwards** (= **after that**) or **then**:

*Don't have a meal and bathe immediately afterwards.*

*They bathed and afterwards played games/played games afterwards or*

*They bathed and then played games.*

**afterwards** can be used at either end of the clause and can be modified by **soon, immediately, not long** etc.:

*Soon afterwards we got a letter.*

*We got a letter not long afterwards.*

**after** can also be used as a conjunction:

*After he had tuned the piano it sounded quite different.*

## 93 Travel and movement: **from, to, at, in, by, on, into, onto, off, out, out of**

- A We travel **from** our starting place to our destination:  
*They flew/drove/cycled/walked from Paris to Rome.*  
*When are you coming back to England?*
- B We also send/post letters etc. to people and places. (But see note on home below.)  
**arrive at/in, get to, reach** (without preposition)  
 We **arrive** in a town or country, **at** or **in** a village, at any other destination:  
*They arrived in Spain/in Madrid.*  
*I arrived at the hotel/at the airport/at the bridge/at the crossroads.*  
 get to can be used with any destination, and so can reach:  
*He got to the station just in time for his train.*  
*I want to get to Berlin before dark.*  
*They reached the top of the mountain before sunrise.*  
**get in** (**in** = adverb) can mean 'arrive at a destination'. It is chiefly used of trains:  
*What time does the train get in? (reach the terminus/our station)*  
 Note also get there/back (there, back are adverbs).  
**home**  
 We can use a verb of motion etc. + home without a preposition:  
*I took us an hour to get home.*  
*They went home by bus.*  
 But if **home** is immediately preceded by a word or phrase a preposition is necessary:  
*She returned to her parents' home.*  
 We can **be/live/stay/work** etc. **at home, at + . . . + home** or **in + . . . + home**. But **in** cannot be followed directly by home:  
*You can do this sort of work at home or at/in your own home.*  
 Transport: **by, on, get in/into/on/onto/off/out of**  
 We can travel by car (but **in** the/my/Tom's car), **by** bus/train/plane/helicopter/hovercraft etc. and **by** sea/air. We can also travel **by** a certain route, or **by** a certain place (though via is more usual):  
*We went by the M4. We went via Reading.*  
 We can walk or go **on** foot. We can cycle or go **on** a bicycle or **by** bicycle. We can ride or go **on** horseback.  
 We get **into** a public or private vehicle, or get **in** (adverb).  
 We get **on/onto** a public vehicle, or get **on** (adverb).  
 But we go **on board** a boat (= embark).  
 We get **on/onto** a horse/camel/bicycle.  
 We get **out of** a public or private vehicle, or get **out** (adverb).  
 We get **off** a public vehicle, a horse, bicycle, etc., or get **off** (adverb).  
**get in/into/out/out of** can also be used of buildings, institutions and countries instead of **go/come/return** etc. when there is some difficulty in entering or leaving, in and out here are used as adverbs.  
*I've lost my keys! How are we going to get into the flat/to get in? (adverb)*  
*The house is on fire! We had better get out! (adverb)*  
*It's difficult to get into a university nowadays.*
- F Giving directions: **at, into, to** etc. (prepositions), **along, on** (prepositions and adverbs) and **till** (conjunction):  
*Go along the Strand till you see the Savoy on your right.*  
*The bus stop is just round the corner.*  
*Turn right/left at the Post Office/at the second traffic lights.*  
*Go on (adverb) past the post office.*  
*Turn right/left into Fleet Street.*  
*Take the first/second etc. turning on/to the right or on/to your right.*  
*Go on (adverb) to the end of the road. (till could not be used here.)*  
*You will find the bank on your left halfway down the street.*  
*When you come out of the station you will find the bank opposite you/in front of you.*  
*Get out (of the bus) at the tube station and walk on (adverb) till you come to a pub.*  
*Get off (the bus! and walk back (adverb) till you come to some traffic lights.*
- Be careful not to confuse to and till (see 92 A).

94 **at, in; in, into; on, onto**

A **at and in**

(For **arrive at/in**, see 93 B.)

**at**

We can be **at** home, **at** work, **at** the office, **at** school, **at** university, **at** an address, **at** a certain point e.g. **at** the bridge, **at** the crossroads, **at** the bus-stop.

**in**

We can be **in** a country, a town, a village, a square, a street, a room, a forest, a wood, a field, a desert or any place which has boundaries or is enclosed.

But a small area such as a square, a street, a room, a field might be used with **at** when we mean 'at this point' rather than 'inside'.

We can be **in** or **at** a building, **in** means inside only; **at** could mean inside or in the grounds or just outside. If someone is 'at the station' he could be in the street outside, or in the ticket office/waiting room/restaurant or on the platform.

We can be **in** or **at** the sea, a river, lake, swimming pool etc.

**in** here means actually in the water:

*The children are swimming in the river.*

**at** the sea/river/lake etc. means 'near/beside the sea'. But **at** sea means 'on a ship'.

B **in and into**

**in** as shown above normally indicates position.

**into** indicates movement, entrance:

*They climbed into the lorry. I poured the beer into a tankard.*

*Thieves broke into my house/My house was broken into.*

With the verb **put**, however, either **in** or **into** can be used:

*He put his hands in/into his pockets.*

**in** can also be an adverb:

*Come in = Enter. Get in (into the car).*

C **on and onto**

**on** can be used for both position and movement:

*He was sitting on his case. Snow fell on the hills.*

*His name is on the door. He went on board ship.*

**onto** can be used (chiefly of people and animals) when there is movement involving a change of level:

*People climbed onto their roofs. We lifted him onto the table.*

*The cat jumped onto the mantelpiece.*

**on** can also be an adverb:

*Go on. Come on.*

95 **above, over, under, below, beneath etc.**

A **above and over**

**above** (preposition and adverb) and **over** (preposition) can both mean 'higher than' and sometimes either can be used:

*The helicopter hovered above/over us.*

*Flags waved above/over our heads.*

But **over** can also mean 'covering', 'on the other side of', 'across' and 'from one side to the other':

*We put a rug over him.*

*He lives over the mountains.*

*There is a bridge over the river.*

**all over** + noun/pronoun can mean 'in every part of':

*He has friends all over the world.*

**above** can have none of these meanings.

**over** can mean 'more than' or 'higher than'.

**above** can mean 'higher than' only.

Both can mean 'higher in rank'. But **He is over me** would normally mean 'He is my immediate superior', 'He supervises my work', **above** would **not** necessarily have this meaning.

we have a bridge over a river, *above the bridge* means 'upstream'.

**over** can be used with meals/food/drink:

*They had a chat over a cup of tea.* (while drinking tea)

in the combination **take** + a time expression + **over** + noun/pronoun,

**over** can mean 'to do/finish' etc.:

*He doesn't take long over lunch/to eat his lunch.*

*He took ages over the job.* (He took ages to finish it.)

**above** can also be an adjective or adverb meaning 'earlier' (in a book, article etc.):

*the above address* (the previously mentioned address)

*see B above* (the previously mentioned section B)

**B below and under**

**below** (preposition and adverb) and **under** (preposition) can both mean 'lower than' and sometimes either can be used. But **under** can indicate contact:

*She put the letter under her pillow.*

*The ice crackled under his feet.*

With **below** there is usually a space between the two surfaces:

*They live below us.* (We live on the fourth floor and they live on the third.)

Similarly: *We live above them.* (See A above.)

**below** and **under** can mean 'junior in rank'. But *He is under me* implies that I am his immediate superior, **below** does not necessarily have this meaning.

(Both **over** and **under** can be used as adverbs, but with a change of meaning.)

**C beneath** can sometimes be used instead of **under**, but it is safer to keep it for abstract meanings:

*He would think it beneath him to tell a lie.* (unworthy of him)

*She married beneath her.* (into a lower social class)

**D beside, between, behind, in front of, opposite**

Imagine a theatre with rows of seats: A, B, C etc.. Row A being nearest the stage.

		<u>Stage</u>		
Row A	Tom	Ann	Bill	
Row B	Mary	Bob	Jane	

This means that:

*Tom is beside Ann; Mary is beside Bob etc.*

*Ann is between Tom and Bill; Bob is between Mary and Jane.*

*Mary is behind Tom; Tom is in front of Mary.*

But if Tom and Mary are having a meal and Tom is sitting at one side of the table and Mary at the other, we do not use **in front of**, but say:

*Tom is sitting opposite Mary or Tom is facing Mary.*

But *He stood in front of me* could mean either '*He stood with his back to me*' or '*He faced me*'.

People living on one side of a street will talk of the houses on the other side as *the houses*

*opposite* (us) rather than *the houses in front of us*. With other things, however, these

restrictions do not apply:

*She put the plate on the table in front of him.*

*She sat with a book in front of her.*

*Where's the bank? - There it is, just in front of you!*

*There's a car-park in front of/at the back of the hotel.*

*Don't confuse **beside** with **besides**.*

**beside** = at the side of:

*We camped beside a lake.*

**besides** (preposition) = in addition to/as well as:

*I do all the cooking and besides that I help Tom.*

*Besides doing the cooking I help Tom.*

**besides** (adverb) means (a) 'in addition to that/as well as that':

## I do the cooking and help Tom besides

and (b) 'in any case/anyway':

*We can't afford oysters. Besides, Tom doesn't like them.* (See 327.)

**F between and among**

**between** normally relates a person/thing to two other people/things,

but it can be used of more when we have a definite number in mind;

*Luxembourg lies between Belgium, Germany and France.*

**among** relates a person/thing to more than two others; normally we have no definite number in mind:

*He was happy to be among friends again.*

*a village among the hills*

**with** could also be used instead of **among** in the last sentence above.

Also, of course, with a singular object:

*He was with a friend.*

Examples of other uses:

*He cut it with a knife.*

*Don't touch it with bare hands.*

*The mountains were covered with snow.*

*I have no money with me/on me.*

*He fought/quarreled with everyone.*

In descriptions:

*the girl with red hair*

*the boy with his hands in his pockets*

*the man with his back to the camera/with his feet on his desk*

**but** and **except** (prepositions)

These have the same meaning and are interchangeable.

**but** is more usual when the preposition + object is placed immediately after nobody/none/nothing/nowhere etc;

*Nobody but Tom knew the way.*

*Nothing but the best is sold in our shops.*

**except** is more usual when the preposition phrase comes later in the sentence:

## Nobody knew the way except Tom

and after *all/everybody/everyone/everything/everywhere* etc.

**but** is more emphatic than **except** after *anybody/anything/anywhere* etc.:

You can park anywhere but/except here. (You can't park here.)

**but** and **except** take the bare infinitive (see 98).

For **but for** in conditional sentences, see 226. For **but** as a conjunction, see 326.)

## 96 Prepositions used with adjectives and participles

Certain adjectives and past participles used as adjectives can be followed by a preposition + noun/gerund. (For verbs + prepositions, see 97.)

Usually particular adjectives and participles require particular prepositions. Some of these are given below; others can be found by consulting a good dictionary, which after any adjective will give the prepositions that can be used with it.

**about, at, for, in, of, on, to, with** used with certain adjectives and participles:

*absorbed in*

*according to*

*accustomed to (see 163)*

*afraid of (27 B, 271)*

*anxious for/about (27 C)*

*ashamed of*

*aware of (27 P)*

*bad at/for*

*capable of*

*confident of*

*due to/for (27 A)*

*exposed to*

*fit for*

*fond of*

*frightened of/at*

*good at/for*

*interested in*

*involved in*

*keen on*

*liable for/to*

*nervous of*

*owing to (27 A)*

*pleased with*

*prepared for*

*proud of*

*ready for*

*responsible for/to*

*scared of*

*sorry for/about (27 B)*

*successful in*

*suspicious of*

*terrified of*

*tired of*

*used to (163)*

He was absorbed in his book.  
 She is afraid/frightened/scared of the dark.  
 According to Tom it's 2.30. (Tom says it's 2:30.)  
 He is bad/good at chess, (a bad/good player)  
 Running is bad/good for you. (unhealthy/healthy)  
 They are very keen on golf.  
 Drivers exceeding the speed limit are liable to a fine.  
 The management is not responsible for articles left in customers' cars.  
 I'm sorry for your husband. (I pity him.)  
 I'm sorry for forgetting the tickets.  
 I'm sorry about the tickets.

(For good/kind etc. + of, It was kind of you to wait, see 26 B.)

## 97 Verbs and prepositions

A large number of verb + preposition combinations are dealt with in chapter 38. But there are a great many other verbs which can be followed by prepositions and some of these are listed below. More can be found in any good dictionary.

<i>accuse sb of</i>	<i>insist on</i>
<i>apologize (to sb) for</i>	<i>live on (food/money)</i>
<i>apply to sb/for sth</i>	<i>long for</i>
<i>ask for/about</i>	<i>object to</i>
<i>attend to</i>	<i>occur to</i>
<i>beg for</i>	<i>persist in</i>
<i>believe in</i>	<i>prefer sb/sth to sb/sth</i>
<i>beware of</i>	<i>prepare for</i>
<i>blame sb for</i>	<i>punish sb for</i>
<i>charge sb with (an offence)</i>	<i>quarrel with sb about</i>
<i>compare sth with</i>	<i>refer to</i>
<i>comply with</i>	<i>rely on</i>
<i>conform to</i>	<i>remind sb of</i>
<i>consist of</i>	<i>resort to</i>
<i>deal in</i>	<i>succeed in</i>
<i>depend on</i>	<i>suspect sb of</i>
<i>dream of</i>	<i>think of/about</i>
<i>fight with sb for</i>	<i>wait for</i>
<i>fine sb for</i>	<i>warn sb of/about</i>
<i>hope/or</i>	<i>wish for</i>

*Do you believe in ghosts?*  
*They were charged with receiving stolen goods.*  
*You haven't complied with the regulations.*  
*For a week she lived on bananas and milk.*  
*It never occurred to me to insure the house.*  
*They persisted in defying the Saw.*  
*When arguments failed he resorted to threats.*

Notice also **feel like** + noun/pronoun = feel inclined to have something:

Do you feel like a drink/a meal/a rest?

**feel like** + gerund = feel inclined to do something:

*I don't feel like walking there.*

(For like used in comparisons, see 21 G-I.)

Passive verbs can of course be followed by **by** + agent; but they can also be followed by other prepositions:

*The referee was booed by the crowd.*  
*The referee was booed for his decision/for awarding a penalty.*

## 98 Gerunds after prepositions