English as a Second Language (ESL): Use of Prepositions

A preposition is a word that links together words in a sentence and usually describes position, direction, or time. Each preposition has rules that determine its use.

**In:**

The preposition *in* is used to indicate an enclosed space that is considered an area, such as a geographical location, a room, or a building.

- The children played *in the park*.
- We waited *in the lobby*.

Use the preposition *in* with objects that act as containers.

- The key is *in my pocket*.
- Put the groceries *in the fridge*.

Use the preposition *in* when describing what is contained within liquids or other substances.

- Would you like sugar *in your coffee*?
- There is a lot of fat *in these cookies*.

The preposition *in* can also be used with phrases about time. Use *in* when it is followed by these words: *the past, the present, the future, the morning, the afternoon, the evening, a month, a year, a century, a season*.

- The dog needs to go for a walk *in the morning*.
- *In a month*, it will be my birthday.

Use *in* to describe the amount of time needed to do something.

- I will be ready *in a few minutes*.
- *In two years*, Amy will have her Bachelor’s Degree.

Use *in* to indicate that something is part of something else.

- There are three gray kittens *in the litter*.
- I have many old coins *in my collection*.
Other Preposition Combinations With *In*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>be dressed in</th>
<th>be located in</th>
<th>be specialized in</th>
<th>fill in</th>
<th>get in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>be interested in</td>
<td>be immersed in</td>
<td>be disappointed in (someone)</td>
<td>break in</td>
<td>drop in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be involved in</td>
<td>be wrapped up in</td>
<td>be caught up in</td>
<td>fall behind in</td>
<td>live in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**To:**

The preposition *to* can indicate movement toward a goal or destination.

- Let’s go *to a restaurant*.
- Melissa is going *to the University of Virginia*.

However, do not use *to* when using verbs of motion with the noun *home*.

- The children *went home*.
- *Drive home* carefully.

The preposition *to* is usually used in the following sequence: subject + verb + to + infinitive. An **infinitive** is the basic form of a verb such as *eat*, *work*, and *play*. Use *to* with an infinitive to indicate **willingness** (*be willing, consent, refuse*), **desire** (*desire, wish, prefer, want, request, ask, like*), **intention** (*intend, prepare, plan*), and **obligation** (*be obligated, have, need*).

- Joseph *refuses to cooperate*. (willingness)
  
  subject + verb + to + infinitive

- Do you *want to leave*? (desire)
  
  subject + verb + to + infinitive

- He *planned to return* before midnight. (intention)
  
  subject + verb + to + infinitive

- The dog *needs to eat*. (obligation)
  
  subject + verb + to + infinitive
**Other Preposition Combinations With To**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>be accustomed to</th>
<th>complain to (someone)</th>
<th>be opposed to</th>
<th>be married to</th>
<th>prefer (this) to (that)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>add (this) to (that)</td>
<td>be devoted to</td>
<td>invite (someone) to (something)</td>
<td>be nice to</td>
<td>be related to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apologize to (someone)</td>
<td>be engaged to</td>
<td>listen to</td>
<td>speak to (someone)</td>
<td>be similar to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>belong to</td>
<td>compare (this) to (that)</td>
<td>look forward to</td>
<td>be polite to</td>
<td>introduce (someone) to (someone)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Toward(s):**

While *to* indicates arrival at a destination, *toward* indicates movement to a destination without actually arriving there. *Toward* can also be written as *towards*. Both forms have the same meaning.

- If you walk *toward(s) the Testing Center*, you will see Tutoring Services on the right-hand side of the hall.
- Turn *toward(s) the teacher* and pay attention.

**On:**

The preposition *on* is used with an enclosed space that is considered a surface.

- We were driving *on the highway* when we saw the accident.
- The toddler drew *on the walls*.

The preposition *on* is used with means of public transportation: *on the train, on the bus, on the plane, and on the boat*. However, use the preposition *in* for cars by saying *in the car*.

- Is this your first time riding *on a plane*?
- Christy accidentally locked her keys *in the car*.

The preposition *on* is used with phrases about time. Use *on* when it is followed by a date, a weekday, or a weekday morning, afternoon, or evening.

- The paper is due *on March 12*.
- Class is cancelled *on Friday*, but we still have class *on Monday morning*.
The preposition **on** is also used with things that can be thought of as lines such as roads or streets.

- I live *on Courthouse Road.*
- Turn right *on Caroline Street.*

Use the preposition **on** with different types of lists.

- What is *on the agenda* for today?
- We forgot an item *on the grocery list.*

**Other Preposition Combinations With On**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>hang on</th>
<th>hold on</th>
<th>carry on</th>
<th>dream on</th>
<th>on time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>on top of</td>
<td>on break</td>
<td>to give up on <em>(something)</em></td>
<td>dependent on <em>(something)</em></td>
<td>be in on <em>(something)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Into/Onto:**

*Into* indicates the movement of someone or something from the outside to the inside of a three dimensional space. On the other hand, *in* indicates the position of the subject after it has completely entered the space. **Note:** *Into* can generally be replaced with *in*, but *in* cannot always be replaced with *into*.

- Ann went *into/in her office.*
- Ann is *in her office.* (In this case, *into* cannot be used)

*Onto* indicates movement toward a two dimensional surface while *on* indicates the position of the subject after it has completely placed itself on the surface. **Note:** *Onto* can generally be replaced with *on*, but *on* cannot always be replaced with *onto*.

- Megan fell *onto/on the floor.*
- Megan is *on the floor.* (In this case, *onto* cannot be used)

**At:**

The preposition *at* is used to describe location, destination, or direction.

- George is waiting *at the fountain.* (location)
- The waiter will be *at your table* in a minute. (destination)
- He threw a baseball *at the window.* (direction)
The preposition **at** is also used with phrases about time. Use **at** when it is followed by these words: **noon, night, midnight, present, the moment, the present time.** Also use **at** when it is followed by a time on the clock.

- Meet me for lunch **at noon.**
- I’m busy **at the moment,** but come back **at 2:00.**

Use **at** to show when someone was a particular age.

- **At age five,** she learned to read.
- Mary published her first book **at age twenty-six.**

Use **at** to show that an activity is directed toward something or someone.

- The monkey threw a banana **at the zoo keeper.**
- The mother yelled **at the children.**

Use **at** to show the cause of a reaction.

- We laughed **at the movie.**
- Lisa is angry **at Robin.**

### Other Preposition Combinations With **At**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>to be angry at (someone)</th>
<th>arrive at (a building/a room)</th>
<th>laugh at</th>
<th>look at</th>
<th>point at</th>
<th>stare at</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### Above/Below:

Use **above/below** to indicate elevation, authority, amount, or temperature.

- The portrait is **above the fireplace.** (higher elevation)
- The vice principal is ranked **below the principal.** (lower authority)
- Kristen’s SAT score is **above average.** (higher amount)
- During the snowstorm, the temperature was **below freezing.** (lower temperature)

Use **above all** or **above all else** to mean more than anything else.

- I like this flavor of ice-cream **above all else.**
- **Above all,** Tom works the hardest.
**Over/Under:**

Use *over/under* to indicate a higher or lower position in a straight line.

- To solve this equation, place the 2 *under the 5* and subtract. (directly below)
- The sun rose *over the mountain* (directly above)

Use *over/under* to mean more than/less than.

- George worked as a waiter for *over two years*.
- I would like to buy a car that is *under $13,000*.

Use *under* to mean affected by.

- Bill took the day off because he was *under a lot of stress*.
- The young man was arrested for being *under the influence of alcohol*.

Use *over* to mean during.

- *Over the past few months*, Jacob has learned to ride a bike.
- What are you doing *over the weekend*?

Use *over* to mean while having a meal or a drink.

- We can discuss the matter *over lunch*.
- Let’s talk about it *over coffee*.

Use *over* to mean spanning or moving across.

- Hang the banner *over the doorway*.
- We traveled *over the mountains* to get there.

Use *over* or *all over* to mean in many different areas.

- The rumor spread *all over town*.
- The smoke spread *over the entire city*.

Use *over* to mean on someone or something.

- The widow wore a black veil *over her face*.
- Pour cookie crumbs *over the top layer*.