What is a preposition?

Prepositions are words that set up relationships between a noun and other words in the sentence. When a preposition is paired with a noun, noun phrase, or pronoun, the result is a prepositional phrase: for example, *on the large balcony, to the store, after George’s game*

There are many ways to use prepositions; however, the examples below will focus on the most troublesome prepositions that show time and place: at, on, in, to, and for.

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**Prepositions that designate a place**

1. **At** is used for
   a. specific addresses with numbers:
      Gilbert lives *at* 305 Hillside Street.
      Sherlock Holmes lives *at* 221 B Baker Street.
   b. for less specific places where only the general location is known:
      Julie works *at* the school. (general because we don’t know which school)
      Meet me *at* the intersection of Del Mar and McPherson. (general because we don’t know which specific building or business)
   c. for events in which the subject is not participating:
      Loretta is enjoying herself *at* the game.
      Did you see Chris *at* the concert?

2. **On** is used for
   a. the names of streets, avenues, etc. that don’t include house numbers:
      Gilbert lives *on* Hillside Street.
      The Herrera family lives *on* Tree House Road.
   b. a surface (as opposed to an enclosed area, which requires *in*):
      The book is *on* the table.
      The cat is *on* the desk.
   c. forms of public transportation that people can walk into:
      Betty is *on* the plane (train, trolley, bus, street car, etc.).
      The kids *on* the bus go wah-wah-wah.

3. **In** is used for
   a. the names of land-areas (towns, counties, states, countries and continents):
      Gilbert lives *in* the Hillside subdivision.
   b. events in which the subject is a participant:
      Susan was *in* the grand finale of the play.
   c. an enclosed area:
      He is lying *in* bed. (This implies that he’s enclosed by the sheets.)
      The teacher is *in* the classroom. (The room is enclosed by walls)
Using Prepositions I

d. private forms of transportation people can’t walk into:
   The dog is in the car.
   Everyone is going in Bob’s new SUV.

e. references to a piece of writing:
   The eye is a recurring image in Jane Eyre.
   Sandra argues for world peace in her essay.

4. To is used for movement toward an event or place. (Whether the destination is reached depends on the tense):
   Are you going to the Bucks game?
   Michael Johnson sprinted to the finish line.

5. Toward and towards explain movement without reaching the destination or goal:
   I sneaked toward the kitchen. (But I haven’t arrived yet.)
   This is a big step towards the project’s completion. (But the project’s not completed yet.)

6. No preposition is required for the words downtown, uptown, inside, outside, downstairs, and upstairs since all contain prepositions (down, up, in, out):
   Grandma crawled upstairs.
   Melissa and Daniela drove downtown to shop.
   Joe ran outside to play.
   Home doesn’t contain a preposition and doesn’t need one.
   The bird flew home.
   I wish I were home.

Prepositions that designate time

1. At designates a specific moment in time.
   Let’s go to the Dave Matthews Band concert at 7:00 P.M.
   At the sound of the bell, you have to go to class.
   The carriage turns into a pumpkin at the stroke of midnight.

2. On designates specific days by either name (Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, etc.) or date (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, . . . 31st).
   The new Real World season starts on Tuesday. (The day is given.)
   She graduates on the 25th. (The date is given.)
   Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon on July 20, 1969. (The date is given.)
   On the last Friday in March, I’m going on a cruise. (The day is given.)

3. In is used for nonspecific times during a day, month, season, or year.
   The sequel to Bridget Jones’s Diary premiered in December. (The specific day and/or date is missing.)
   The new season of Average Joe will begin in the fall. (The specific day and/or date is missing.)
Marilyn Monroe was born in 1926. (The specific day and/or date is missing.)
I like to nap in the afternoon. (The specific time is missing.)

4. **For** is used to measure the duration of time (seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, and years).

   The turkey should be in the oven for forty-five minutes.
   **For** ten years, Brett Favre has played in the NFL.
   Michael Jackson has been performing for three decades.

5. **Since** is used when counting forward from a specific date or time in the past to the present.

   **Since** my first biology class, I have known that I wanted to be a doctor.
   Ariel has been at the Writing Center since 2:00 p.m.
   The Dave Matthews Band has been creating music since 1991.

The following are some common prepositions:

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