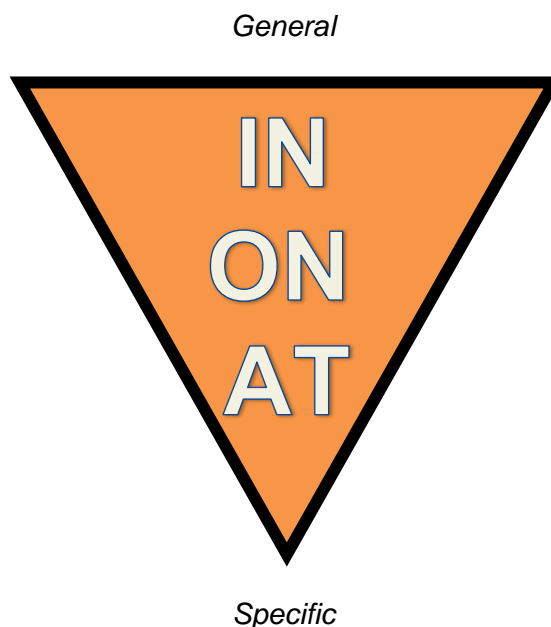


## Prepositions

Prepositions define relationships between nouns and locate words, actions or ideas in a particular time or place. Knowing which prepositions to use in different circumstances can be difficult because the English language does not always follow a logical set of rules when applying “at” or “in” to a given situation. However, in many cases, the following diagram can simplify the decision of which preposition to use.



This diagram works for nearly all time-related prepositional phrases because “**in**” is generally used for the broadest time expressions, years or seasons (“**in 1984**”, “**in the winter**”); the preposition “**on**” is used for days of the week or month (“**on Tuesday**”, “**on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May**”); and “**at**” is used for specific times of the clock or day (“**at 5 o’clock**”, “**at midnight**”). Two possible exceptions to this rule are the more specific time expression “**in a few minutes**” and the more general “**at the turn of the century**”.

This diagram also applies generally to any place-related prepositional phrases because “**in**” is used for the least defined locations, countries and regions (“**in Canada**”, “**in outer space**”); the preposition “**on**” is used for any noun resting on a surface (“**on the table**”, “**on the third floor**”); and “**at**” is used for specific locations (“**at the bank**”, “**at Western University**”). The exceptions for place-related prepositions include any instance when “**in**” is understood to mean “**inside**” (“**in the Engineering building**”), which would indicate a specific location, and in circumstances where “**on**” is used for large, general surfaces (“**on planet Earth**”). The preposition “**on**” is also exceptional in that many statements in English use “**on**” when written words on paper are implied (“**on the list**”, “**on a committee**”).

## Verb/Preposition Combinations

The use of prepositions in sentences can be further complicated by the many combinations of verbs and prepositions in English. Compounding this problem is the fact that many verbs routinely pair with only one preposition, while others can pair with more than one preposition. The following chart provides conjugations for some of the more common pairs in academic writing.

Verb	Present	Past	Future	Progressive
Contribute + to	They contribute to the study.	They contributed to the study.	They will contribute to the study.	They are contributing to the study.
Base + on	They base their findings on previous work.	They based their findings on previous work.	They will base their findings on previous work.	They are basing their findings on previous work.
Result + in	This method results in a large reduction.	This method resulted in a larger reduction.	This method will result in large reduction.	This method is resulting in a large reduction.
Dis/agree + with	The figure agrees with the hypothesis.	The figure agreed with the hypothesis.	The figure will agree with the hypothesis.	The figure is agreeing with the hypothesis.
Compare + to <b>*shows how two things are alike</b>	They compare love to a flower.	They compared love to a flower.	They will compare love to a flower.	They are comparing love to a flower.
Compare + with <b>*discusses similarities and differences</b>	They compare the social model with the empirical model.	They compared the social model with the empirical model.	They will compare the social model with the empirical model.	They are comparing the social model with the empirical model.
Arrive + in <b>*reach a place using a specific method of travel</b>	They arrive in a car.	They arrived in a car.	They will arrive in a car.	They are arriving in a car.
Arrive + at <b>*conclude</b>	They arrive at the answer.	They arrived at the answer.	They will arrive at the answer.	They are arriving at the answer.
Participate +in	They participate in sports.	They participated in sports.	They will participate in sports.	They are participating in sports.
Consist + of <b>*make up (active)</b>	This chapter consists of five parts.	This chapter consisted of five parts.	This chapter will consist of five parts.	This chapter is consisting of five parts.
Compose + of <b>*make up (passive)</b>	This chapter is composed of five parts.	This chapter was composed of five parts.	This chapter will be composed of five parts.	This chapter is being composed of five parts.
Comprise + no preposition <b>*take in</b>	This chapter comprises five parts.	This chapter comprised five parts.	This chapter will comprise five parts.	This chapter is comprising five parts.

## “Of” and “For”

The distinction between the prepositions “**of**” and “**for**” is often problematic for non-native speakers of English. Though there are exceptions, the general rule is that “**of**” indicates possession, relation, or causation.

“**The Crown Jewels of Queen Elizabeth are kept in the Tower of London.**” – describes possession, the jewels belong to the Queen and the Tower is part of London.

“**This is a picture of my friend.**” – describes relation, what the picture depicts.

“**The root of the problem is clear.**” – describes causation, the root causes the problem.

In comparison with the functions of the preposition “**of**”, the preposition “**for**” is usually associated with an action, and is a shortened form of “for the purpose of...”. When used in two of the above examples, the resulting sentences are:

“**The Crown Jewels for Queen Elizabeth are kept in the Tower of London.**”

“**This is a picture for my friend.**”

Both of these examples indicate that the nouns “Crown Jewels” and “picture” are associated with the action of giving. In other words, the nouns are “for the purpose of giving” them to the recipients. Consider two more examples:

“**I would die for peanut butter.**” Action: “**I would die for the purpose of eating peanut butter.**”

“**I would die of peanut butter.**” Causation: “**Peanut butter would kill me.**”

Therefore, when determining if the preposition you want to use is “**of**” or “**for**”, ask yourself if the relationship between nouns you want to describe involves possession, relation or causation, or if the relationship instead involves an action.

## “By” and “Through”

The distinction between the prepositions “**by**” and “**through**” can also be difficult, but the rule separating them is clear. “**By**” is used to describe direct causes while “**through**” indicates indirect causes. Consider the following examples:

“**My plant was killed by my brother.**” – direct cause, the brother took the action of killing the plant.

“**My plant died through negligence.**” – indirect cause, the plant died but who or what took an action to cause that death is unclear.

When deciding whether you want to use “**by**” or “**through**” in a sentence, first try to locate the subject and its verb, and then determine if that verb is directly causing some result. If it is, then you want to use “**by**”, and if not, use the preposition “**through**”.

## Prepositional Phrases

Prepositions can be bundled with other words to make prepositional phrases. These phrases have the same function as regular prepositions and can appear at the beginning, middle or end of sentences. Consider the following example:

**“Last Thursday, I went to the movies with my friends.”**

This sentence contains three different prepositional phrases. It begins with a time-based prepositional phrase **“Last Thursday”**. Note that when a prepositional phrase begins a sentence, there is a characteristic pause indicated by a comma. The middle phrase **“to the movies”** is a place-based prepositional phrase. The sentence ends with the adjective phrase **“with my friends”**. The prepositional phrases in the middle and at the end of the sentence do not require commas.

**Practice Exercise:** Correct the errors in preposition use below.

1. The band refused to put a cover song in their new album.
2. My best friend is a student at the Music department in the University of Western Ontario.
3. If that food is bad, you should throw it to the garbage.
4. Dave always puts the guitar to the guitar case after Dave has finished playing.
5. The last time I was at Paris, I met two werewolves who lived in Bourbon Street.
6. Edgar Allan Poe has had a big influence in me.

### Answers

1. The band refused to put a cover song on their new album.
2. My best friend is a student in the Music department at the University of Western Ontario.
3. If that food is bad, you should throw it in the garbage.
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6. Edgar Allan Poe has had a big influence on me.