Prepositions describe relationships between two or more things. A difficulty with prepositions is that there aren’t many rules to help you decide which preposition to use.

Prepositions are tricky little words, e.g.
- We get in and out of a car or a taxi
- We get on and off a bicycle, a bus, a train, a boat or a plane.

Different prepositions can have similar meanings, e.g.
- in the afternoon
- on Sunday afternoon.

Vertical movement prepositions include down, off, on, onto, over, up, e.g.
- Don’t fall down the stairs.
- She just fell off her skate board.
- Go up the stairs on the right.
- He jumped over the fence.

Other prepositions, e.g. against, along, around, at, beside, by, in, near, next, on, the right /left side of, between describe horizontal relationships.

We use at for a point in space, e.g.
- at the starting line
- on with a surface, e.g. on the street.

Compare the following.
- See you at the Library (inside or outside).
- See you in the library (inside).

In conveys the idea of being surrounded by something, e.g. The answer is in the book. The child is in the park.

We tend to use
- in with countries, cities, towns
- on with streets, roads.

Some prepositions describe ‘facing’ relationships, i.e. when people or objects are facing the same way, e.g. after, before, behind, in front of.
- Kim is after/behind Jo in the queue.
- Jo is in front of/before Kim in the queue.

We use above and below to talk about rank or level, e.g.
- Is Chancellor above or below Vice-

Prepositions of position

↓ Prepositions of position

Some prepositions, e.g. above, after, below, down, on, on top of, over, under, underneath, up describe vertical relationships, e.g.
- The plane flew above the clouds
- We are going to fly over Perth (horizontal movement suggested).

They crawled below the building.
- Under/over 100 people attended the seminar (= less than/more than).

We use above and below to talk about rank or level, e.g.
- Is Chancellor above or below Vice-
Opposite and in front of can be used when two people or things are facing each other, e.g. when two people are looking at each other.

- Mike is standing opposite Mary.
- Mary is standing in front of Mike.
- The cinema is opposite the park.

Prepositions of time
Prepositions are used to describe a point in time, e.g. at, in, on.
- Use at for specific times and periods, e.g. at Easter (time), at twelve o’clock.
- Use in with parts of days, months, seasons, e.g. in May, in Summer.
- Use on with days and dates, e.g. on Wednesday, on New Year’s Day, the first of January.

Compare
- We arrived on time (at the time specified).
- We arrived in time (before the time specified).

Prepositions are also used to describe the duration of time. They include: between, during, for, from, since, throughout, up to, within.
- The common lunch hour at UWA is from 1pm to 2pm on Tuesdays.
- The common lunch hour is between 1pm and 2pm on Tuesdays.
- During the semester break, many students go away.
- I have been studying at UWA since 2012 (a point in time).
- I have been studying at UWA for three years (a period of time).

Notice the difference between despite and in spite of.
- Despite the rain, a large crowd turned up. Don’t put of after ‘despite’.
- In spite of the rain, a large crowd turned up.

Tip
Keep a vocabulary notebook. Record expressions that include prepositions. You’ll come across plenty as there are many more than the ones mentioned in this Guide.

Remember, the more you read in English and the more you listen to English being spoken, the more you will develop an intuition for which preposition is the best to use.


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