USING PREPOSITIONS

What are prepositions?

Prepositions are used to show the relationship between a noun or pronoun and other words in a sentence. Words like of, in, to, for, with, under and between are common examples of prepositions.

Prepositions often describe the position, time or manner in which something is done. They can be tricky because there aren’t many rules to help you decide which preposition to use.

TIP

Most of the time, prepositions will come in front of a noun or pronoun, e.g. I ate lunch with my friends; We went to the cinema.

However, at times we can end sentences with a preposition, e.g. He had no savings to speak of; Where did she come from? Placing the preposition before the pronoun often makes the sentence more formal, e.g. From where did he come?

Prepositions of position

Prepositions can describe the direction, location and space of nouns and pronouns.

Illustration of positional prepositions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In</th>
<th>On</th>
<th>Under</th>
<th>Over</th>
<th>Behind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In front of</td>
<td>Between</td>
<td>Out of</td>
<td>In / into</td>
<td>Far from</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some prepositions (e.g. above, after, below, down, 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 (this example suggests horizontal movement).
- They crawled beneath the building.
- Under 50 people attended the seminar (here under means ‘less than’).
- Don’t fall down the stairs
- She jumped off the platform.

TIP

We use ‘above’ and ‘below’ to talk about rank or level, e.g. A Captain is ranked above a Lieutenant but below a Major.

Other prepositions (e.g. against, along, around, beside, on, at, near, next to) describe horizontal relationships, e.g.
- We are at the starting line.
- He sidled up beside his colleague.

TIP

We tend to use ‘in’ with countries, cities and towns (e.g. I am in Perth), ‘on’ with streets, roads and islands (e.g. The car is on Smith Street) and ‘at’ with addresses and specific locations (e.g. Meet me at the Reid library).

Finally, some prepositions describe relationships when people or objects are facing the same way (e.g. after, before, behind, in front of), or facing each other (e.g. opposite, in front of, against). For example,
- Kim is after Jo in the queue.
- Mike is standing opposite Mary.
- Perth Glory lost against Sydney FC.
Prepositions of time

Prepositions can be used to describe a point in time. The prepositions at, in and on are especially useful for this task.

Use ‘at’ for specific times and periods, e.g. at Easter (time); at twelve o’clock.

Use ‘in’ with parts of days, months or seasons, e.g. in June; in the 20th century.

Use ‘on’ with days and dates, e.g. on New Year’s Day, on the third of December.

Prepositions can also describe the duration of time. Words like between, during, for, from, since, throughout, up to and within are often used in this way. For example,

- The common lunch hour at UWA is from 1pm to 2pm on Tuesdays.
- The common lunch hour is between 1pm and 2pm on Tuesdays.
- Many students leave Perth during the semester break.
- 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).

Prepositions of manner

Sometimes prepositions tell us about the way something happens or how something is done. Some examples are the words by, in, like, on and with. For instance:

- We couldn’t afford to travel by airplane.
- She held her balance with great poise.
- Coaches say he runs like a gazelle.

Prepositions of cause and effect

We also use prepositions to express the cause of something, and the effect it has on something else. Some examples include the phrases because of, on account of and due to. For instance,

- On account of the cold weather, we stayed home.
- They are late because of the bad traffic.
- They estimate the Earth’s average temperature has risen by 0.5°C since 1880 due to greenhouse emissions.

TIP

Keep a vocabulary notebook to record expressions that include prepositions.

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