



WRITING CENTER

Prepositions and Prepositional Phrases

CONTENTS: *CLICK ON A HEADING BELOW TO JUMP DIRECTLY TO THAT TOPIC.*

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PREPOSITIONS

A **preposition** is a word that connects a noun or a pronoun to another word in a sentence.

Common prepositions

about	behind	down	next	to
above	below	during	of	toward
across	beneath	except	off	under
after	beside	for	on	unlike
against	besides	from	onto	until
among	between	in	opposite	unto
around	beyond	inside	out	up
as	but	into	outside	with
at	by	like	over	within
before	despite	near	past	without

PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

A **prepositional phrase** is a group of words that begins with a preposition and ends with a noun, a pronoun, or a word group serving as a noun. This ending element is called the **object of the preposition**.

The combination of a preposition and a noun or pronoun gives us a prepositional phrase.

of many **after** the game **to** the house **for** you

Note: The phrases often include an article (**a, an, the**).



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Preposition	Prepositional phrase	Object of the preposition
in	in a house	house
from	from the market	market
with	with an antelope	antelope
for	for the last time	time

THE INDIRECT OBJECT PHRASE

A prepositional phrase with a hidden preposition is the **indirect object phrase**. An indirect object looks like an object of the verb, but is really an object of the “hidden” preposition **to, for, or of**.

To find if there is an indirect object, use the **indirect object question**.

Example: Mr. Potter showed Ms. Calendar a better way.

- *Indirect object question:* **Showed to whom?**
- *Answer:* To Ms. Calendar
- *Hidden preposition for indirect object:* Mr. Potter showed (**to**) Ms. Calendar a better way.

HOW TO USE PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Prepositional phrases are either adjectives or adverbs, so the adjective and adverb questions identify them.

When prepositional phrases act as **adjectives**, they answer one of the following questions:

Which?

What kind?

How many?

Whose?

However, most **adjective prepositional phrases** answer the question **which**. For example:

Example: The horse in the third stall is mine.

- Adjective question: **Which** horse?
- Answer: The horse **in the third stall**.



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When prepositional phrases act as adverbs, they answer one of the five adverb questions:

When?

Where?

Why?

How?

Under what conditions?

Example: We stood in the rain for hours.

- This sentence has two prepositional phrases used as adverbs.
- *in the rain* tells us **where** we stood.
- *for hours* tells us **when** we stood.

WHERE TO USE PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Prepositional phrases can modify many parts of a sentence and may be found in several places:

Examples: **In the big house with his dog at his side**, Mike felt safe.

I was walking **through the snow**, and I was cold.

Ali slumped like a broken doll **after the boxing match**.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

SUBJECT OF A SENTENCE

A prepositional phrase is never the subject of a sentence. Crossing out the prepositional phrases helps to identify the subject.

Example: A student in the class fell asleep during the long lecture.

- **In** and **during** are prepositions.
- *Crossing out their prepositional phrases leaves* A student fell asleep.
- A student ~~in the class~~ fell asleep ~~during the long lecture~~, therefore **student** is the subject of the sentence.

INTRODUCTORY WORDS OF CLAUSES

Often, prepositions can be used as **introductory words of clauses**, not as prepositional phrases. The clause has a subject and a verb; the phrase does not.



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Examples: *Introductory independent clause:* **After I came home**, I went to bed.
(Both clauses have a subject and a verb.)

Introductory prepositional phrase: **After the game**, I went to bed.
(*After the game* does not have a subject and verb, so it is a prepositional phrase.)

INFINITIVE PHRASES

Infinitive phrases (**to** plus a verb) cause trouble in identifying prepositional phrases:

- The word **to**, with a noun, creates a **prepositional** phrase, but
- The word **to**, with a verb, creates an **infinitive** phrase.

Examples: *Prepositional phrase:* I went to the game. (**game** is a noun, so *to the game* is a prepositional phrase)

Infinitive: I wanted to go. (**go** is a verb, so *to go* is an infinitive)

IDIOMS

Idioms are groups of words that do not easily fit the standard rules of grammar. People who "run for office," for example, need not be track stars; rather, this idiom means they are seeking public office.

Combinations of verbs or adjectives and prepositions can be confusing for both native and nonnative English speakers.

Common idioms

from time to time
out of the blue

at all times
on the other hand

in the end
for a living

out of season
by the way



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EXERCISES

PRACTICE EXERCISE A

Make prepositional phrases out of these words by drawing lines from one column to the other.

in	the movies
over	the water
under	the couch
at	the ground

Tip: Many of the nouns can be interchanged (**in the movies, in the water, in the ground**). Use prepositional phrases to add details to writing.

PRACTICE EXERCISE B

Underline the prepositional phrases in the following sentences.

Example: I needed a bandage for my elbow.

1. During the war, I went to Germany.
2. Through the water, I could see into the ship.
3. To see England was my dream.
4. In the hallway I saw a man going to the office.
5. When he called I ran to the telephone.
6. As soon as I got home, my mom wanted to leave.
7. We went to the baseball game on Saturday.
8. To get to Westport, you need to drive on the highway.



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PRACTICE EXERCISE C

Mark each adverb prepositional phrase with (parentheses). Identify which of the five adverb questions each prepositional phrase answers:

When?

Where?

Why?

How?

Under what conditions?

Example: The laundry room is located (in the back) (of the house). Adverb question = **Where?**

1. The mail is usually delivered in the morning on Saturdays.
2. She looked at the baby for hours.
3. In a few minutes, the candle will burn out completely.
4. This week our new teacher canceled all of his classes.
5. The students handed in the final copies of their essays.