Prepositions are often one of the most difficult aspects of English for speakers of other languages to learn. However, some parts of preposition use are harder to learn than others. The major trouble is not with the “free” prepositions—that is, the prepositions whose use is determined largely by the meaning of the preposition itself. Most of the difficulty is with the “governed” prepositions—that is, the prepositions whose use is at least partially determined by the presence of another element in the sentence.

“Free” prepositions

The freely occurring prepositions can be discussed in terms of spatial prepositions, time prepositions, and ‘other’ prepositions.

Spatial prepositions

The spatial prepositions, that is, the prepositions that mark something's location, can be partially although not completely understood in terms of two cross-cutting considerations: whether the location is seen as having one, two, or three dimensions and whether the verb indicates movement. Places are treated as having one, two, or three dimensions. And, if the description is static, one set of prepositions is used; and if the description involves movement to or from the location, another set of prepositions is used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>one dimension</th>
<th>two dimensions</th>
<th>three dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>static</td>
<td>at</td>
<td>on</td>
<td>in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dynamic</td>
<td>to</td>
<td>on(to)</td>
<td>in(to)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The static prepositions can be illustrated by the following sentences:

I stopped typing at the end of the page.
(being viewed as a one-dimensional point)
I put my pen on the table.
(being viewed as a two-dimensional surface)
I put my coffee cup in the sink.
(being viewed as a three-dimensional container)

It is worth noting that it is not how something is in the real world, but how it is being viewed that governs the choice of preposition. Thus, the choice of preposition changes not only as the real world facts change, but also our viewpoint of the world changes. Consider the following sentences, which contrast on and in:

The boy stood on the grass.
(being viewed as two-dimensional)
The insect hid in the grass.
(being viewed as three-dimensional)

Similarly, the following sentences contrast at and in:

The plane stopped at (or, in) San Francisco.
(being viewed as one- or three-dimensional)
Pierre lives in San Francisco.
(being viewed as three-dimensional)

These notions, of course, do not fully explain the use of spatial prepositions.

**Time prepositions**

The prepositions marking time expressions, although they are clearly related to those marking spatial expressions, simply have to be memorized.

at five o'clock on Thursday in January
at dawn in March

Certain prepositions mark certain units of time.

**Other prepositions**

Many free prepositions have relatively well-defined meanings which are teachable.

*From* and *to*. *From* indicates a starting point, while *to* indicates an ending point. These often occur together as a pair describing a physical setting ‘from here to there’, a temporal setting *from now to then*, or the two ends of a continuum *from simple neglect to outright criminal activity*.

*With*. *With* occurs indicating accompaniement, for example, *with Joesphine*. It also occurs marking the instrument used for an action, for example, *with an axe*.

*By*. In addition to its meaning marking a location, *by* also occurs marking the agent of an action, for example, *The moonshiner was killed by the sheriff*.

And still other free prepositions have their own range of meanings.

*Note*: Many prepositions use our “body orientation” to locate things spatially. Thus, we talk about things being *in front of, behind, beside, above, over, on top of, or under* us. We also sometimes attribute this same body orientation to things. Thus, things can be *in front of, behind, beside, above, over, on top of, or under* a car.

**Governed prepositional choice**

The difficult prepositions, however, for a foreigner to learn to use are those prepositions that as a result of another element in the sentence—the “governed” prepositions.

Prepositions can be governed by nouns, by adjectives, or by verbs. In addition, they may also occur as part of a particular construction. For instance, *for* and *to* may occur
because one clause is being embedded in another, for example, *It was difficult for Bill to sleep.* (See the discussion of complementizers in Chapter 11.)

**Prepositions governed by nouns**

The choice of preposition may be governed by a noun. Although some uses make sense in terms of the meaning of the preposition, in practice these combinations have to be learned one at a time.

- Your *dependence on* Harry is not very healthy.
- A little more *independence from* him would help.
- His *acceptance of* the problem went along way towards solving it.
- Our country has an *agreement with* that nation.
- The collection was for the *benefit of* some orphans.
- The thieves had some *connection with* the mob.
- The jury had a lot of *doubts about* the evidence.
- Her *insistence on* honesty was consistent with her character.
- Sherry has a constant *need for* money.

**Prepositions governed by adjectives**

Certain prepositions occur with specific adjectives. These simply have to be learned one at a time.

- Whenever he had a problem, he got *angry at* somebody else.
- Otherwise, he was usually *happy with* life.
- I'm not *lazy about* some things; I'm *lazy about* everything.
- Horatio is *mad at* Alex; Alex is *mad at* everyone.
- Lend me a dollar, please. I'm *short of* cash.
Prepositions and “cause-effect indicators”

As with many other parts of English grammar, cause-effect indicators are often not single words but phrases. As an example, consider the various ways the italicized portions of the sentences can be paraphrased (taken from a lesson preparing students to write cause-effect essays):

Poor health in big cities is one of the effects of pollution.

because of a result of a consequence of due to caused by ¹

Pollution causes harm to the environment.

accounts for results in leads to is responsible for is a reason for

Notice that, for example, it is the word due in the phrase due to that tells one that the preposition to is going to occur; similarly, it is accounts in the phrase accounts for that tells one that the preposition for is going to occur. Thus, the italicized phrases are best learned as “chunks”.

¹. The preposition by is here, of course, because the verb is in the passive voice.
Terms

To check yourself, see if you can briefly describe each of the following terms and illustrate it in a phrase or sentence (underlining the relevant part).

“free” prepositions

“governed” prepositions:
  governed by nouns
  governed by adjectives

spatial prepositions

time prepositions