Prepositions

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>One dimension</th>
<th>Two dimensions</th>
<th>Three dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Static</td>
<td>At</td>
<td>On</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic</td>
<td>To</td>
<td>On(to)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 15: Time prepositions

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
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 governed by verbs
Certain verbs occur with specific prepositions, that is, the verb consists of both a verb and a preposition. One characteristic of such verb plus preposition combinations is that the meaning of the combination is often not obvious from the meaning of the verb and the meaning of the preposition involved.

You shouldn't laugh at him. He's just like that.

For example, the meaning of laugh at ‘to ridicule’ is not just a combination of the individual meanings of laugh and at. Thus, at least in terms of their meanings, such combinations have to be learned one by one.

The chair said she would see to the problem next week.
The dog watched for his owner to come home every afternoon.
The warehouse was turned into a church.
Don't depend on Bill for help.
Ask for help if you need it.

**Verbs with attached particles (Phrasal verbs)**

Verbs also occur with attached particles. Particles are forms that, despite looking like prepositions, differ from them in at least two ways: Prepositions are relatively immobile; particles, in sentences with direct objects, occur either before or after the direct object.

I don't like to break in new sandals.
I don't like to break new sandals in.

*Pick the book up.*
*Pick up the book.*

What is important is to recognize that in break new sandals in, break in is a unit. Learners of English have to learn these units one at a time.

In verb plus preposition combinations, the preposition is unstressed;
Don't pick on your brother.

but, in verb plus particle combinations, the particle is stressed.

Don't put on your shoes.

For many, hearing these stress differences is a problem. Fortunately, stress is only of marginal importance.

Like the verb plus preposition combinations, one characteristic of phrasal verbs is that the meaning of the combination is often not obvious from the meaning of the verb and the meaning of the particle involved.

I don't like to break in new sandals.

For example, this meaning of to break in is not just a combination of the individual meanings of break and in. Thus, for the learner, such combinations have to be acquired one by one.

**EXERCISE 15.1: PHRASAL VERBS**

Instructions:

A. For the sentences with direct objects, rewrite the sentence with the particle in its other possible location.

Don't put on your shoes.

Don't put your shoes on.

B. For the passive sentences, rewrite the sentence as active, putting the particle to the right of the direct object.

The package was shipped out by the company.

The company shipped the package out.

1. I wear out my sandals every six months or so.
Chapter 15: Verbs with attached particles (Phrasal verbs)

2. *Put out* all smoking material.

3. *Look over* this exam carefully and then answer the questions.

4. The criminals were *turned in* by their friends.

5. The constant work *tired out* the athletes.

6. The Volkswagen was *cut off* by the truck.

7. *Clear up* your own problems before you criticize others.

8. Can you *work out* the last example?

9. The noise of the television *broke down* her concentration.

10. The chemistry lab was *blown up* by those freshmen.

11. *Draw up* a proposal and we’ll look at it.

**EXERCISE 15.2: PHRASAL VERBS**

Underline the verbs in the following pairs of sentences. What is the difference? Hint: The verbs are not identical in the (a) and the (b) sentences.

1. a. The politician played up the scandal.
   b. The children played up the street.

2. a. The driver ran down the pedestrian.
   b. The jogger ran down the street.

3. a. Jeff turned in his cousin.
   b. His cousin turned in the side street.


**Exercise 15.3: Phrasal versus Prepositional Verbs**

First, underline the main verb plus the related preposition or particle in each sentence. Then, decide if the related element is a preposition or a particle.

1. We can't put off our departure any longer.
2. The play took in four hundred dollars last night.
3. Have you disposed of your bicycle yet?
4. The company has shut down the factory for a week.
5. I'll sell off the remaining property.
6. You can't laugh at such a man.
7. Hold off your creditors for another week.
8. If you close the windows, you will shut out the heat.
9. The officials will run off the race at ten o'clock.
10. We were laughed at for our pains.
11. This business can be disposed of in five minutes.
12. The boxer knocked out his opponent in the first round.
13. I can't seem to work out the problem.
14. Don't leave out the last two questions.
15. She put up with him for years.
16. Dr. Thompson has taken over Dr. Harlow's practice.
17. How do you laugh off such criticism?
18. You surely won't sneeze at such a chance, will you?
19. If you put up the money, we can start work at once.
20. But until someone puts up some money, we can't begin.
21. The sheriff quickly and effectively put down the riot.
22. I shall look over the applications immediately.
23. Several of his neighbors helped out Mr. Jaffy last week.
24. Soon Grandfather will turn over the business to me.
25. Sam looked into the matter of the oil leases.

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

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”.

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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
- governed by verbs

spatial prepositions

time prepositions

phrasal verbs (=verbs with attached particles)
- particle

verbs with attached prepositions

Answers to Exercise 15.1:

1. I wear my sandals out every six months or so.
2. Put all smoking material out.
3. Look this exam over carefully and then answer the questions.
4. Their friends turned the criminals in.
5. The constant work tired the athletes out.
6. The truck cut the Volkswagen off.
7. Clear your own problems up before you criticize others.
8. Can you work the last example out?
9. The noise of the television broke her concentration down.
10. Those freshmen blew the chemistry lab up.
11. Draw up a proposal and we’ll look at it.
Chapter 15: Terms

Answers to Exercise 15.2:

1. a. The politician played up the scandal.
   The verb is played up; the scandal is a direct object.
   b. The children played up the street.
   The verb is played; up is the preposition in the preposition phrase up the street.

2. a. The driver ran down the pedestrian.
   The verb is ran down; the pedestrian is a direct object.
   b. The jogger ran down the street.
   The verb is ran; down is the preposition in the preposition phrase down the street.

3. a. Jeff turned in his cousin.
   The verb is turned in; this cousin is a direct object.
   b. His cousin turned in the side street.
   The verb is turned; in is the preposition in the preposition phrase in the side street.

Answers to Exercise 15.3:

1. We can't put off our departure any longer. (particle)
2. The play took in four hundred dollars last night. (particle)
3. Have you disposed of your bicycle yet? (preposition)
4. The company has shut down the factory for a week. (particle)
5. I'll sell off the remaining property. (particle)
6. You can't laugh at such a man. (preposition)
7. Hold off your creditors for another week. (particle)
8. If you close the windows, you will shut out the heat. (particle)
9. The officials will run off the race at ten o'clock. (particle)
10. We were laughed at for our pains. (preposition)
11. This business can be disposed of in five minutes. (preposition)
12. The boxer knocked out his opponent in the first round. (particle)
13. I can't seem to work out the problem. (particle)
14. Don't leave out the last two questions. (particle)
15. She put up with him for years. (both a particle and a preposition)
16. Dr. Thompson has taken over Dr. Harlow's practice. (particle)
17. How do you laugh off such criticism? (particle)
18. You surely won't sneeze at such a chance, will you? (preposition)
19. If you put up the money, we can start work at once. (particle)
20. But until someone puts up some money, we can't begin. (particle)
21. The sheriff quickly and effectively put down the riot. (particle)
22. I shall look over the applications immediately. (particle)
23. Several of his neighbors helped out Mr. Jaffa last week. (particle)
24. Soon Grandfather will turn over the business to me. (particle)
25. Sam looked into the matter of the oil leases. (preposition)