

English as a Second Language (ESL): Use of Prepositions

A **preposition** is a word that links together words in a sentence and usually describes position, direction, or time. Each preposition has rules that determine its use.

You can navigate to specific prepositions in this handout by clicking the links below.

[In](#): pg. 1

[To](#): pg. 2

[Toward\(s\)](#): pg. 3

[On](#): pg. 3

[Into/Onto](#): pg. 4

[At](#): pg. 5

[Above/Below](#): pg. 6

[Over/Under](#): pg. 6

In:

The preposition ***in*** is used to indicate an enclosed space that is considered an area, such as a geographical location, a room, or a building.

- The children played ***in the park***.
- We waited ***in the lobby***.

Use the preposition ***in*** with objects that act as containers.

- The key is ***in my pocket***.
- Put the groceries ***in the fridge***.

Use the preposition ***in*** when describing what is contained within liquids or other substances.

- Would you like sugar ***in your coffee***?
- There is a lot of fat ***in these cookies***.

The preposition *in* can also be used with phrases about time. Use *in* when it is followed by these words: *the past, the present, the future, the morning, the afternoon, the evening, a month, a year, a century, a season.*

- The dog needs to go for a walk *in the morning*.
- *In a month*, it will be my birthday.

Use *in* to describe the amount of time needed to do something.

- I will be ready *in a few minutes*.
- *In two years*, Amy will have her Bachelor’s Degree.

Use *in* to indicate that something is part of something else.

- There are three gray kittens *in the litter*.
- I have many old coins *in my collection*.

Other Preposition Combinations With *In*

be dressed in	be located in	be specialized in	fill in	get in
be interested in	be immersed in	be disappointed in (<i>someone</i>)	break in	drop in
be involved in	be wrapped up in	be caught up in	fall behind in	live in

To:

The preposition *to* can indicate movement toward a goal or destination.

- Let’s go *to a restaurant*.
- Melissa is going *to the University of Virginia*.

However, do not use *to* when using verbs of motion with the noun *home*.

- The children *went home*.
- *Drive home* carefully.

The preposition *to* is usually used in the following sequence: *subject + verb + to + infinitive*. An **infinitive** is the basic form of a verb such as *eat, work, and play*. Use *to* with an infinitive to indicate **willingness** (*be willing, consent, refuse*), **desire** (*desire, wish, prefer, want, request, ask, like*), **intention** (*intend, prepare, plan*), and **obligation** (*be obligated, have, need*).

- Joseph **refuses to cooperate**. (willingness)
subject + verb + to + infinitive
- Do you **want to leave**? (desire)
subject + verb + to + infinitive
- He **planned to return** before midnight. (intention)
subject + verb + to + infinitive
- The dog **needs to eat**. (obligation)
subject + verb + to + infinitive

Other Preposition Combinations With To

be accustomed to	complain to (<i>someone</i>)	be opposed to	be married to	prefer (<i>this</i>) to (<i>that</i>)
add (<i>this</i>) to (<i>that</i>)	be devoted to	invite (<i>someone</i>) to (<i>something</i>)	be nice to	be related to
apologize to (<i>someone</i>)	be engaged to	listen to	speak to (<i>someone</i>)	be similar to
belong to	compare (<i>this</i>) to (<i>that</i>)	look forward to	be polite to	introduce (<i>someone</i>) to (<i>someone</i>)

Toward(s):

While **to** indicates arrival at a destination, **toward** indicates movement to a destination without actually arriving there. **Toward** can also be written as **towards**. Both forms have the same meaning.

- If you walk **toward(s) the Testing Center**, you will see Tutoring Services on the right-hand side of the hall.
- Turn **toward(s) the teacher** and pay attention.

On:

The preposition **on** is used with an enclosed space that is considered a surface.

- We were driving **on the highway** when we saw the accident.
- The toddler drew **on the walls**.

The preposition **on** is used with means of public transportation: **on the train, on the bus, on the plane,** and **on the boat.** However, use the preposition **in** for cars by saying **in the car.**

- Is this your first time riding **on a plane?**
- Christy accidentally locked her keys **in the car.**

The preposition **on** is used with phrases about time. Use **on** when it is followed by a date, a weekday, or a weekday morning, afternoon, or evening.

- The paper is due **on March 12.**
- Class is cancelled **on Friday,** but we still have class **on Monday morning.**

The preposition **on** is also used with things that can be thought of as lines such as roads or streets.

- I live **on Courthouse Road.**
- Turn right **on Caroline Street.**

Use the preposition **on** with different types of lists.

- What is **on the agenda** for today?
- We forgot an item **on the grocery list.**

Other Preposition Combinations With *On*

hang on	hold on	carry on	dream on	on time
on top of	on break	to give up on (<i>something</i>)	dependent on (<i>something</i>)	be in on (<i>something</i>)

Into/Onto:

Into indicates the movement of someone or something from the outside to the inside of a three dimensional space. On the other hand, **in** indicates the position of the subject after it has completely entered the space. ****Note: Into** can generally be replaced with **in,** but **in** cannot always be replaced with **into.**

- Ann went **into/in her office.**
- Ann is **in her office.** (In this case, **into** cannot be used)

Onto indicates movement toward a two dimensional surface while **on** indicates the position of the subject after it has completely placed itself on the surface. **Note: **Onto** can generally be replaced with **on**, but **on** cannot always be replaced with **onto**.

- Megan fell **onto/on the floor**.
- Megan is **on the floor**. (In this case, **onto** cannot be used)

At:

The preposition **at** is used to describe location, destination, or direction.

- George is waiting **at the fountain**. (location)
- The waiter will be **at your table** in a minute. (destination)
- He threw a baseball **at the window**. (direction)

The preposition **at** is also used with phrases about time. Use **at** when it is followed by these words: **noon, night, midnight, present, the moment, the present time**. Also use **at** when it is followed by a time on the clock.

- Meet me for lunch **at noon**.
- I'm busy **at the moment**, but come back **at 2:00**.

Use **at** to show when someone was a particular age.

- **At age five**, she learned to read.
- Mary published her first book **at age twenty-six**.

Use **at** to show that an activity is directed toward something or someone.

- The monkey threw a banana **at the zoo keeper**.
- The mother yelled **at the children**.

Use **at** to show the cause of a reaction.

- We laughed **at the movie**.
- Lisa is angry **at Robin**.

Other Preposition Combinations With **At**

to be angry at (someone)	arrive at (a building/ a room)	laugh at	look at	point at	stare at
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Above/Below:

Use *above/below* to indicate elevation, authority, amount, or temperature.

- The portrait is *above the fireplace*. (higher elevation)
- The vice principal is ranked *below the principal*. (lower authority)
- Kristen's SAT score is *above average*. (higher amount)
- During the snowstorm, the temperature was *below freezing*. (lower temperature)

Use *above all* or *above all else* to mean more than anything else.

- I like this flavor of ice-cream *above all else*.
- *Above all*, Tom works the hardest.

Over/Under:

Use *over/under* to indicate a higher or lower position in a straight line.

- To solve this equation, place the 2 *under the 5* and subtract. (directly below)
- The sun rose *over the mountain*. (directly above)

Use *over/under* to mean more than/less than.

- George worked as a waiter for *over two years*.
- I would like to buy a car that is *under \$13,000*.

Use *under* to mean affected by.

- Bill took the day off because he was *under a lot of stress*.
- The young man was arrested for being *under the influence of alcohol*.

Use *over* to mean during.

- *Over the past few months*, Jacob has learned to ride a bike.
- What are you doing *over the weekend*?

Use *over* to mean while having a meal or a drink.

- We can discuss the matter *over lunch*.
- Let's talk about it *over coffee*.

Use **over** to mean spanning or moving across.

- Hang the banner **over the doorway**.
- We traveled **over the mountains** to get there.

Use **over** or **all over** to mean in many different areas.

- The rumor spread **all over town**.
- The smoke spread **over the entire city**.

Use **over** to mean on someone or something.

- The widow wore a black veil **over her face**.
- Pour cookie crumbs **over the top layer**.