



## Some Vital Prepositions and Their Uses

### Preposition is used with . . .

**about** relating a composition or creative work to its subject or theme: *This movie is **about** a woman astronaut who survives an accident in outer space. This essay/poem/painting is **about** forgiveness. This book is **about** geologic formations of the Pleistocene.*

the focus of one's attention and activity: *We tried to go **about** our business like nothing had happened.*

actions involving the full extent of an area ("About" is often used in British English where Americans use "around," but they are also combined to avoid word repetition): *I went **about** making breakfast while the kids stumbled around upstairs. I went **about** the room tidying pillows and books. I looked **about** for help. You are free to move **about** the cabin.*

approximate figures or estimations: *It's been **about** five years since we saw him. I'm **about** finished with my project.*

**at** a finite point, a junction, a specific time, a passive object of an action:

***at** 40.35°N and 150.75°W, **at** the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Main Street,*

***at** 5:35 p.m., look **at** the television, "You're talking **at** me, not to me!"*

(idiom exception: *He goes for walks at night.* not *\*at morning*, or *\*at afternoon*)

**by** the means of achieving a goal: *She goes everywhere **by** foot.*

*I found the information **by** searching the Internet. She will get into Harvard **by** getting good grades and test scores and **by** knowing how to charm people.*

passing a stationary object: *I drove **by** your house last night.*

authorship: *This story is **by** Stephen Fry.*

the doer of a passive verb: *He is followed **by** thousands of Twitter members.*

## Preposition is used with . . .

- for** an action performed in the pursuit of a result/goal, or toward the benefit of someone: *shop **for** groceries, study **for** a test, apply **for** admission, run **for** mayor, work **for** the company*
- a thing that exists in order to benefit someone or something: *a gift **for** you*
- an action with a desired goal or purpose in the mind of the subject:  
*"I did it **for** love!" or We did it **for** all the wrong reasons.*
- duration: *I studied **for** five hours.*
- in** boundaries, borders, shapes, walls, spans, passengers of cars/trucks/  
smaller vehicles: ***in** Belgium, **in** January, **in** King County, **in** Bellevue, **in** a circle,  
**in** a car, **in** a prop plane, **in** a room,*
- after a beginning but before an end: ***in** the morning/afternoon/evening, **in** my  
memory, **in** World War II, **in** the chaos of the riot,*
- the contents of a communication medium: ***in** the article/essay/movie/  
episode/email/speech/text/posting . . .*
- (Compare to **into**, used for movement from outside a boundary to inside:  
*I went **into** my room.* Or for transformations: *He turned **into** a werewolf.*)
- of** a piece or pieces relating to a larger whole, belonging, attributes:  
*the fingers **of** my right hand, a friend **of** my sister, members **of** Congress,  
a member **of** the faculty, a light shade **of** green, that tone **of** voice* (Fun fact: In  
the history of telling time, *the fifth hour **of** the clock* became *five o'clock*)
- on** something touching a surface: ***on** the road, **on** my face, **on** the table, **on** the  
(printed) page, **on** the wall*
- relating an occurrence with a specific day of the week: *I'll meet you **on** Tuesday.  
We go shopping **on** Saturdays.*
- content broadcast by an electronic medium: ***on** television, **on** the radio,  
**on** the phone, **on** the Internet* (compare to *in a book, or in the newspaper*)
- the topic of communication: *a paper **on** climate change, a movie **on** the life of  
Helen Keller, a speech **on** the dangers of texting while driving*
- passengers or cargo of large, flat-level vehicles and self-powered vehicles:  
***on** a bus, **on** a train, **on** an airplane, **on** a boat, **on** a motorcycle, **on** a bicycle,  
**on** a skateboard* (compare to *in a car, in a truck, in a van*)

## Preposition is used with . . .

with accompaniment, joining, alliances, affiliation, agreement: *My friends went **with** me. Mix magenta **with** cyan and you'll get purple. She is **with** Seattle City Light. I'm **with** you on this.*

a tool or instrument used to achieve a goal: *I built it **with** my own two hands. He attracted me **with** a silken-voiced "How you doin'?"*

to an active or willing recipient: *I talked **to** you yesterday. She ran **to** her daddy's arms. (Compare *I talked at you yesterday*, and *You yelled at me yesterday*.)*

a destination: *I sent a message **to** you. I'm going **to** class. She flew **to** Istanbul.*

connecting a main verb to a second verb, esp. verbs of mental actions that can cause other actions: *I **want to buy** a new car. I **hate to bother** you. I **decided to do** some research (in order) **to make** a better-informed decision.*

The verbs **make**, **let**, **see**, and **hear** are NOT followed by "to" before a **bare infinitive verb**:

*Don't **let** the cat **go** outside; **make** her **stay** indoors.*

*They **made** me **talk** to the crowd; it **let** me **know** they had confidence in my ability.*

*I could **see** you **wave** from the balcony; I could not, however, hear you yell, "Hello!"*

Note: Unlike *let*, **allow** DOES use **to** after it: *Please **allow** me **to** introduce myself.*

## Quantifiers That Look Like Prepositions

most of a determined noun<sup>\*</sup> (singular or plural): *He had eaten **most of** an apple. I said goodbye to **most of** my friends. **Most of** the class did not do the assignment.*

<sup>\*</sup> "Determined noun" = **determiner** + *noun*, e.g., **an** apple, **my** friends, **the** assignment, **his** backpack or a noun naming something that can be discussed in parts, such as a place: *I don't drive in **most of** Bellevue.*

In contrast, **most** (no "of") must be followed by a *plural undetermined noun*. (Compare: **Most Americans** are ignorant about geography. **Most breakfast cereals** are loaded with sugar. (correct)

\*He ate **most apple**. \***Most apple** is eaten already. (\*incorrect)

## Conjunctions That Look Like Prepositions

The conjunction **because of** is followed by a noun or noun equivalent, while "formal" **because** (no "of") must be followed by a clause:

***Because of** George's tardiness (noun equiv.), the tour started late.*

*I was grouchy **because of** a headache (noun equiv).*

Compare with **Because** George was tardy (clause), *the tour started late*.

*I was grouchy because* I had a headache (clause).

“Informal” *because* is a shortened form of the “because of” meaning that leaves out the “of,” or is meant to humorously skip explaining complex details and is structured as “because + noun”:

I was late because traffic.

The frozen berries thawed into mush because, you know, science.

## Additional Common Prepositions

(Note: Several of these words also have uses as other parts of speech. Please feel free to discuss these and other prepositions with Writing Lab tutors.)

aboard	except	under
above	excepting	underneath
across	excluding	unlike
after		until
against	following	up
along	from	upon
amid/amidst	inside	
among/amongst	into	versus
anti-		via
around	like	within
as	minus	without
before		
behind	near	
below	off	
beneath	onto	
beside	opposite	
besides	outside	
between	over	
beyond		
	past	
concerning	per	
considering	plus	
despite		
down		
during		