

Prepositions

Choosing the right preposition can be challenging for ESL speakers because prepositions do not translate well from one language to another. In addition, much preposition use is not governed by rules. This handout begins with some general rules and explanations, and then it directs you to online resources that can help you identify correct prepositions.

At/on/in for Place and Time

Generally, *at* is used with “small”, *on* with “medium”, and *in* with “big” places and times.

place	time
at McDonald’s	at 5pm
on Oak street	on Monday on July 14 th
in Fairfax in Virginia in the U.S.	in July in summer in 2018

more specific



less specific

	Place	Time
at	name of a place - He works at George Mason University. or address with a number - Mr. Smith lives at 1001 Willow Street	clock times - My class starts at 3:30pm. - The movie starts at 8 o’clock. + at noon/night/midnight/dusk/dawn
on	streets, roads, etc., when there is no number - His house is on Willow Street.	days - I have class on Monday(s) and Wednesday(s). - The concert is on July 17th.
in	cities, states, countries, and continents - He lives in San Francisco/ California/ the U.S.A.	months, seasons, and years - School will start in September. - I was born in 1983. - We love to go camping in the fall. + in the morning/afternoon/evening

Adjective/Noun/Verb + Preposition Combinations

Many adjectives, nouns, and verbs are followed by specific prepositions. No rules govern this use, so these combinations should simply be memorized. The table below illustrates just **a few** examples of such combinations.

Adjective+Prep.	Verb+Prep.	Noun+Prep.	Prep.+Noun
composed of	agree to/with apologize for	application for/to	by law by mistake for/on sale in advance in charge of in general in/on time on a trip on purpose on vacation under pressure with reference to
different from	belong to	demand for	
familiar with	count on	experience of/with	
important for/to	depend on	excuse for	
interested in	disagree about/ with	increase in/of	
known for	explain something to	interest in	
opposed to	look at/for	lack of	
related to	look forward to	need for/of	
similar to	pay attention to	problem with	
responsible for	think about/of	request for	
	work on		

Information above is adapted from Folse, K. S. (2009). *Keys to teaching grammar to English language learners: A practical handbook*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Strategies

If you are unsure of your preposition choice, try one (or several) of the following methods:

- 1) **Dictionary**: using a dictionary can be particularly helpful for identifying prepositions in a combination with an adjective/noun/verb. For example, the search for the verb *approve* in the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (<http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/>) reveals that this verb is followed by the preposition *of*.
- 2) **Collocation dictionary**: a collocation dictionary (e.g. <http://www.ozdic.com/>) shows some common words (including prepositions) that follow a particular word.
- 3) **Google**: search a phrase with a preposition in Google. If the search results show many entries containing this exact phrase, your preposition choice is correct. Conversely, if your initial preposition choice is not precise, you will see fewer entries.
- 4) **Corpus**: search a phrase with or without a preposition in a corpus (e.g. <https://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>). For example, if you want to check if “*at the other hand*” is correct, you can either enter the whole phrase in the search box and then see that the search yields only five matches in a 560 million-word collection of texts meaning that such phrase is almost never used. Alternatively, you may enter a part of the phrase without the preposition “the other hand” or even “other hand” and notice that the only preposition used is *on*. Thus, the correct expression is “*on the other hand*”.
- 5) **Netspeak** (<http://www.netspeak.org/>): enter the phrase you are unsure of in the search box and substitute the preposition with the question mark(?). The tool will show the most common preposition used with the phrase you entered.

Last updated 01/17/2018