A Guide to Using Prepositions

Prepositions are among the basic parts of speech. This handout will help you understand how to use prepositions more effectively.

**Definition:** A preposition connects a noun or pronoun to another part of the sentence.

**Prepositional Phrases:** Taken together, a preposition and its object—the noun or pronoun linked to the sentence—are called a prepositional phrase.

**Example:** I am walking to the store.

*Note:* “To the store” is a prepositional phrase: “to” is the preposition, and “store” is its object.

These prepositions are among the most commonly used words in English:

- about, above, across, after, against, along, among, around, at, before, behind, below, beneath, beside, beyond, by, down, during, except, for, from, in, inside, into, near, of, off, on, onto, out, outside, over, past, through, throughout, to, toward, under, underneath, until, up, upon, via, with, without

**Common Uses**

Prepositional phrases usually assume the role of an adjective or adverb.

**Prepositions as Adjectives**

Adjectives modify nouns. They answer the questions “Which one?” “What kind?” and “How many?” A prepositional phrase can also modify a noun in this way.

**Example:** Use the door in the back.

*Note:* “In the back” is a prepositional phrase modifying “door.” Like an adjective, it answers the question “Which one?” Which door? The one in the back.

**Example:** I recently read a study about climate change.

*Note:* “About climate change” is a prepositional phrase modifying “study.” Like an adjective, it answers the question, “What kind?” What kind of study? The one about climate change.

Additionally, prepositions function like a possessive adjective, answering the question “Whose?”

**Example:** I took a photo of the family.

*Note:* “Of the family” is a prepositional phrase modifying “photo.” Like a possessive adjective, it...
answers the question “Whose?” Whose photo? The one of the family.

**Prepositions as Adverbs**

Adverbs have several roles: they modify verbs, they modify adjectives, and they modify other adverbs. They answer the questions “How?” “Why?” “When?” and “Where?” A prepositional phrase can also function in this way.

*Example:* The bird landed *on my head.*

*Note:* “On my head” is a prepositional phrase modifying the verb “landed.” Like an adverb, it answers the question “Where?” Where did the bird land? On my head.

*Example:* I will wake up *in the morning.*

*Note:* “In the morning” is a prepositional phrase modifying the verb “wake up.” Like an adverb, it answers the question “When?” When will I wake up? In the morning.

*Example:* She jogs *through the park.*

*Note:* “Through the park” is a prepositional phrase modifying the verb “jogs.” As an adverb, it answers the question “Where?” Where does she jog? Through the park.

**Common Errors**

**Misplacement**

Like any modifier, prepositional phrases are considered misplaced if it is unclear which element in a sentence they modify.

*Incorrect:* She saw an exhibit about a woman who was imprisoned in the gallery.

*Note:* In this example, it is not clear if “in the gallery” modifies “imprisoned,” “saw,” or “exhibit.”

*Incorrect:* He ate the sandwich *in his swimsuit.*

*Note:* In this example, it is not clear if “in his swimsuit” modifies “ate” or “sandwich.”

There are two quick ways to fix a misplaced prepositional phrase: either move the phrase closer to the element it modifies or express the thought in something besides a prepositional phrase.

*Correct:* She saw an exhibit in the gallery about a woman who was imprisoned.

*Correct:* He ate the sandwich *while wearing his swimsuit.*

*Some information was borrowed from the University of Maryland’s Writing Center*
Overuse

Too many prepositional phrases can clog a sentence. Reduce as many phrases as you can.

**Wordy:** After the 1-7 loss of Brazil to Germany in the 2014 World Cup, people demonstrated in the streets.

**Concise:** Street demonstrations followed Brazil’s 1-7 loss to Germany in the 2014 World Cup.

Eliminate prepositions by using possessives, adjectives, and adverbs.

**Wordy:** The opinion of the client matters.

**Concise:** The client’s opinion matters.