# THE INS AND OUTS PREPOSITIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Prepositions pose more problems for the non-native speaker or learner of English than any other part of speech. Why? Prepositions are just little words that never change in form; they are pronounced softly, in unstressed syllables; they aren't even given capital letters in book titles; native speakers choose the correct ones without thinking. How can they be confusing?

The word "preposition" has a straightforward definition: a word placed before a noun or pronoun to define its relationship with another word in the sentence. For the learner of English, however, prepositions are anything but straightforward.

—Prepositions are difficult, if not impossible, to define without using other prepositions.

Example:
In the sentence, "The book is on the table," what does on mean?
On means "above and supported by."
—In no other language are the prepositions (if they exist at all) the exact equivalents of English prepositions.

Example:

<table>
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<td>Vive en la Avenida New Jersey.</td>
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<td>He is at the airport.</td>
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<td>Estoy pensando en ti.</td>
<td>I am thinking about you, or I am thinking of you.</td>
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—Many preposition words can also be adverbs or conjunctions.

Examples:

the preposition down  
The adverb down  
the preposition after  
the conjunction after  

She walked down the hill.  
He put the book down.  
She took a nap after lunch.  
She went outside after she put the book down.  

—Many prepositions can indicate more than one meaning or relationship.

Examples with after:

later than  
in pursuit of  
because of  
in the style of  

We rested after lunch.  
The cat is after the mouse.  
He was angry after the way she acted.  
This is a painting after Picasso.
She worked night after night.

—Two or more prepositions can have the same meaning.

Sometimes these prepositions are interchangeable.

Examples:
She is disappointed in her new job.
She is disappointed with her new job.

Sometimes they are not interchangeable.

Examples:
He is fascinated with his new job. (but not in)
He is interested in his new job. (but not with)
He is bored by his new job. (by or with, but not in)

—Many prepositions are also used in expressions where their meaning is entirely different from any of their predictable meanings. Expressions like this do not follow any pattern or logic, and do not allow for substitutions. They must be learned as vocabulary units.

Examples: It's about time.
They are never on time.
She got here in time to see the whole show.

—A preposition in combination with another word may have multiple meanings.

Example:

make up your bed - arrange
make up your face - paint
make up your mind - decide
make up a story  - invent
make up a list  - write down
make up the difference  - equalize
make up last week's homework  - do overdue work
make up for lost time  - compensate
make up with your girlfriend  - reestablish a relationship

— Different prepositions can follow the same verb to change its meaning completely.

Example:

break down  - collapse
break in  - enter by force
break off  - remove
break out  - erupt
break out of  - leave by force
break through  - establish a successful idea
break up  - end a relationship

— New preposition combinations continue to become part of the language.

Examples:

boot up  - restart a computer
key in  - type text on the computer
log on  - connect to the Internet

— Preposition words are sometimes "made into" other parts of speech.
Examples:

prepositions as nouns  I want to learn the ins and outs of prepositions.
prepositions as adjectives  The hospital has only a few in patients.
                         There is a down side to his idea.
prepositions as verbs    I heard they were upping the price.

As if all this weren't enough, English sentence patterns can also be troublesome, especially when prepositions are involved. The use of articles and pronouns and the formation of questions, adjective clauses, and noun clauses can be tricky.

*The Ins and Outs of Prepositions* is designed to take the mystery out of prepositions for those whose first language is not English. It is a comprehensive handbook and guide that explains in detail the 61 commonly used English prepositions and their usage. It is easy to read and understand, and easy to use for quick reference or for more serious study.

Part One consists of a chapter for each of the prepositions. Each chapter includes all of the predictable definitions of the preposition, with typical grammar patterns, example sentences, and lists of the verbs and nouns that are most often used for each meaning. Idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs are also defined and illustrated with examples.

Part Two provides charts and diagrams that illustrate and compare the functional usage of different prepositions. Each section includes exercises and answers that will help the reader remember the guidelines.

Part Three gives formulas and examples that describe the use of prepositions before pronouns and verbs, in adjective and noun clauses, in questions, in separable and nonseparable combinations with verbs, and as other parts of speech. Exercises at the end of each chapter provide practice with these patterns.

Part Four is an alphabetical list of over 3800 common adjectives, nouns, and verbs
with the prepositions that normally precede and/or follow them, with the preposition name and section number of the text where the expression can be found, for further explanation of its meaning and use in a sentence.

Use this book to help yourself become more familiar with the patterns of English sentences. Train your ear to hear prepositions in conversations, and your eye to see them when you read. Ask yourself if you know the underlying meaning of each one. By all means, add new words you hear to the lists in the sections where they belong, and write down new expressions and phrasal verbs as you come across them. Mastering English prepositions is a challenge, but a valuable skill that will enhance your understanding and help you express yourself with confidence.

PART ONE—
THE PREPOSITIONS

How to Use Part One

Each definition of a preposition is followed by one or more patterns, which indicate the word order appropriate for the definition.

The verbs in each pattern can be changed to other tenses.

Example:

Pattern: verb + toward + noun
The money goes toward helping the family.

This could also be:
The money went toward helping the family.
The money will go toward helping the family.
The money is going to go toward helping the family.

When a word cannot be substituted, that word is included in the pattern.
Example:

Pattern: be + after + noun

_The reception is after the wedding._

*be* is the only possible verb for this pattern.

When a word is optional, it is in parentheses.

Example:

Pattern: be + outside (of) + noun

_The dog is outside the house._
_The dog is outside of the house._

When the word *noun* is in the pattern, use the normal patterns for noun usage, as outlined in Part Three.

Example:

Pattern: verb + against + noun

_Dr. Jones is against the idea._

This could also be:

_Dr. Jones is against my idea._  
_Dr. Jones is against this idea._  
_Dr. Jones is against our ideas._  
_Dr. Jones is against some of their ideas._

When the noun determiner cannot be substituted, it is included in the pattern.
Example:

Pattern: verb + against + the + noun  
*We sailed against the wind for an hour.*  
(*the* cannot be replaced by *a, this, my, or any other word*)

When the word *one's* is in the pattern, it can be replaced by any possessive adjective  
(*my, your, his, her, its, our, their*)

Example:

Pattern: to + one's + noun  
*Someone will come to your aid.*  
*Someone will come to his aid.*  
*Someone will come to our aid.*

When no noun determiner is used, the symbol ø is in the pattern.

Example:

Pattern: verb + against + ø + noun  
*I drive against traffic every morning.*

The typical verbs, nouns, and adjectives listed with each pattern are the most common words that are used with the preposition. It is a good idea to think of the combinations as units. As an exercise, you may wish to write sentences with the suggested words, following the pattern and keeping the meaning of the combination in mind.
1 *About* identifies a *topic*.

**Pattern 1: noun + be + about + noun**

*This book is about prepositions.*

Nouns commonly used before *about*:  
argument, article, book, conversation, disagreement, discussion, joke, lecture,  
movie, news, play, program, report, speech, story

**Pattern 2: noun + about + noun**

*She gave me advice about my loan.*

Nouns commonly used before *about*:  
assurance, complaint, comment, gossip, lie, question, statement, truth

**Pattern 3: verb + about + noun**

*He often talks about his job.*

Verbs commonly used before *about*:  
agree, argue, brag, care, complain, cry, do, dream, forget, groan, hear, joke,  
know, laugh, lie, moan, pray, read, say, scream, sing, talk, think, wonder, worry,  
yell

**Expressions:**

to see about—

1. to delay a decision until more information is known  
*We want to buy a house, but we will see about that later.*

2. to get information about  
*I called that office to see about getting a job there.*
to find out about—to get information about
She called the school to find out about her daughter's behavior.

**Pattern 4: verb + noun + about**
She knows something about airplanes.

Typical verbs used with this pattern:
ask, find out, know, learn, say

Typical nouns used before about:
a little, a lot, quite a bit, nothing, something, very little

**Pattern 5: verb + indirect object + about + noun**
They asked me about my trip.

Verbs commonly used with this pattern:
advise, ask, bother, contact, harass, question, remind, teach, tell, write

**Pattern 6: adjective + about + noun**
They were very kind about our late arrival.

Adjectives commonly used before about:
charming, kind, nasty, nice, mean, rude, sweet, understanding, unkind

2 About can identify the cause of an emotion or condition.

**Pattern: adjective + about + noun**
We are excited about our vacation.

Adjectives commonly used before about:
angry, anxious, bashful, concerned, confused, crazy, excited, glad, happy, mad, nervous, objective, optimistic, pessimistic, right, sick, silly, unhappy, upset, worried

3 About (adverb) can mean approximately.

Pattern: about + number
It is about nine o'clock.
We have about ten dollars each.

4 About can mean in all parts of.

Pattern 1: be + noun + about + noun
There is a lot of excitement about town.

Pattern 2: past participle of verb + about + noun
Papers were scattered about the house.

Typical past participles used before about:
scattered, sprinkled, strewn, thrown

5 About can describe a noun.

Pattern: something/nothing + (adjective) + about + noun
There is something about her that I like.
There is something adorable about her.
There is nothing nice about that.

Adjectives commonly used before about:
adorable, attractive, bad, cute, exotic, fascinating, familiar, fishy, funny, good, interesting, nice, peculiar, special, strange, unusual, weird, wonderful
6 About can mean in all directions.

Pattern 1: motion verb + about + noun
*We wandered about town for a few hours.*

Pattern 2: motion verb + about (adverb)
*The baby crawls about the house.*

Verbs commonly used with these patterns:
crawl, go, jump, look, move, poke, run, walk, wander

7 About (adverb) can mean almost.

Pattern: be + about + adjective
*She is about ready.*

Adjectives commonly used after about:
complete, done, finished, perfect, ready, right, through

8 Expressions

about + infinitive—ready to
*The show is about to begin.*

to be about time—an expression of annoyance that a person or thing has arrived late.
"It's about time you got here," said the mother when her daughter came home late.

to have an air about one—to seem uncaring or unfriendly
*That new guy has an air about him.*
not about (adverb) + infinitive—not willing to
I'm not about to sign that agreement.
They're not about to go home early.

about face

1. (verb) a military command to turn halfway around, and face the opposite direction
The sergeant ordered, "About face!"
He told his men to about face.

2. (noun) a complete change of opinion
He did an about face when he learned the facts.

2—
Above

1 Above can mean in or at a higher place.

Pattern 1: be + above + noun
A dark cloud was above the house.

Pattern 2: verb + noun + above + noun
Let's hang the picture above the sofa.

Verbs commonly used before above:
arrange, carry, hang, hold, keep, place, put, set

2 Above can mean at a higher level, value, or rank.
Her blood pressure is above normal.
The children in her class are all above average.
In the navy, a captain is above a commander.

3 Above (adverb) can indicate something written earlier in a book, article, or other
4 Above (adjective) describes something written earlier.

*Please follow the above instructions.*

5 Above indicates that a person is **too good** to commit the stated negative action.

**Pattern 1:** *be + above + noun*

*The policeman is above cruelty.*

Nouns often used after above:
cruelty, dishonesty, meanness, perjury, theft, murder, treason

**Pattern 2:** *be + above + verb in gerund form*

*He may be poor, but he is above stealing.*

Gerunds often used with this meaning:
breaking the law, cheating, gossiping, lying, robbing, snooping, stealing

6 Expressions

up above (adverb)—in heaven

*Our dear grandmother is now in peace up above.*

above and beyond the call of duty—action that is more or greater than what is expected of a person

*My teacher's help after school was above and beyond the call of duty.*

above board—completely honest and open

*Our negotiations with the company were above board.*
above the law—exempt from restrictions of the law
*People in power sometimes believe they are above the law.*

3—
Across

1 *Across* indicates the direction of **movement from one side of an area to the other.**

*Pattern: motion verb + across + noun*
*The girl ran across the yard.*

Verbs often used before *across:*
crawl, drive, go, limp, move, ride, run, swim, walk

2 *Across* can mean **on the other side of** a place.

*Pattern: verb + across + noun*
*My friend lives across the street.*

3 *Across from* means **opposite or facing.**

*Pattern 1: verb + across from + noun*
*My assistant's office is across from mine.*
*My secretary sits across from me.*

*Pattern 2: verb + across + noun + from + noun*
*My assistant's office is across the hall from mine.*

4 *Across and all across* mean **in every area of.**
*People across the world are using the Internet.*
There is a heat wave all across the country.

Expression:

across the board—including everyone or everything
Everyone got a raise in salary: there was a wage increase of three percent across the board.

5 Phrasal verbs

come across (nonseparable)—find something unexpectedly
I came across this old picture of you when I was looking for some documents.

come across (intransitive)—be received by an audience
The banquet speaker was not sure how well he came across.

run across (nonseparable)—to find something unexpectedly
I ran across a letter you wrote to me when we were children.

get (something) across to (separable)—make something understood
The young girl tried to get it across to her boyfriend that she was not ready to get married.

4—

After

1 After means later than or following.

Pattern 1: be + after + noun
The reception is after the wedding ceremony.

Pattern 2: after + gerund form of verb + noun
After finishing your homework, you can watch television.

Pattern 3: after (conjunction) + subject noun + verb
After you finish your homework, you can watch television.

Pattern 4: verb + after (conjunction) + subject noun + verb
The boss left after I came in.

2 After can mean lower in value or rank.
That school's athletes placed after ours in the playoffs.

3 After can mean in pursuit of.

Pattern: verb + after + noun
The cat ran after the mouse.

Verbs often used before after:
be, come, go, run

4 After can mean because of.

Pattern: adjective . . . + after + noun
He was mad at her after her behavior at the party.

Typical nouns used after after:
attitude, behavior, failure, kindness, manners, outburst, reaction, success

5 After can mean in spite of.

Pattern: after + verb in gerund form
They never got married, after dating for years.
After reading this article three times, I still don’t understand it.

6 After can mean in the style of.

Pattern: noun + after + noun
The school play was a drama after Shakespeare.

7 After can indicate continuously.

Pattern: time period + after + same time period
The man waited night after night for his telephone to ring.
Life got harder year after year.
His mother told him time after time to clean up his room.

Nouns often used with this meaning:
day, hour, month, night, time, week, year

8 Expressions

after all

1. in spite of what happened; nevertheless
Our best player got hurt in the first quarter, but we played hard and won the game after all.

2. as a justification
Of course I am tired; after all, I have been working for twelve hours.

after all is said and done—eventually
I know you feel bad now, but you will be glad about this after all is said and done.
after one's own heart—especially appreciated

*Her mother always serves us chocolate cake; she is a woman after my own heart.*

9 Phrasal verbs

look after (nonseparable)—take care of something or somebody
*She looks after our baby on weekends.*

take after (nonseparable)—be similar to an older relative
*The baby takes after his father.*

to name after (separable)—give a baby the name of someone special
*They named the baby after his grandfather.*

5—

Against

1 *Against* means **touching** something or somebody for support.

**Pattern 1:** verb + against + noun

*The man was leaning against his car.*

Typical verbs used before **against**:
*hang, lean, lie, rest, sleep*

**Pattern 2:** verb + noun + against + noun

*They held the mirror against the wall.*

Typical verbs used before **against**:
*butt, hold, keep, lay, lean, place, pull, put, rest, set*
2 Against means touching forcibly.

Pattern: noun + verb + against + noun
The rain beat against the window.

Verbs often used before against:
bang, beat, crash, crush, heave, hit, knock, push, splash, throw, thrust

3 Against means in opposition to.

Pattern: noun + verb + against + noun
The mayor was against the idea of a new day-care center.
Stealing is against the law.
Our senator voted against that bill.

Typical verbs used before against:
act, argue, campaign, debate, fight, go, move, play, vote, work

Nouns often used after against:
action, bill, concept, enemy, force, idea, law, nomination, orders, plan, precepts, principles, proposal, regulations, religion, rules, suggestion, teachings, team, wishes

4 Against can mean toward a force in the opposite direction.

Pattern: verb + against + the + noun
Sailing was rough yesterday; we sailed against the wind all day.

Typical verbs used before against:
drive, fight, go, move, run, sail, struggle, swim, walk
Nouns often used after against:
current, flow, force, tide, wind

Expression:
against traffic—
*I drive against traffic because I live in the city and I work in the suburbs.*

5 Against can mean to the disadvantage of.

Pattern: noun + be + against + noun
*You may not get that job because your age is against you.*

Typical nouns before be against:
age, background, height, inexperience, nationality, youth

6 Against can mean in contrast to.
*It is hard to see your black necklace against that dark dress.*

7 Against can mean in defense of.

Pattern: verb + noun + against + noun
*They vaccinated the children against whooping cough.*
*Their heavy coats protect them against the cold.*

Typical verbs before against:
guard, lock up, protect, seal, vaccinate

8 Against can mean in partial payment of.

Pattern: noun + against + noun
*Enclosed is a check for $100 against my bill.*
Typical nouns after against:
balance, bill, charges, debt, loan

9 Expressions

gainst all odds/with all odds against one—having very little chance of success
*Team A was less experienced than Team B, but they won the game against all odds.*
*Many people come to this country and become successful with all odds against them.*

*go against the grain—seem very wrong*
*Child abuse really goes against the grain.*

*have two strikes against one—be at a strong disadvantage (In baseball, a player is eliminated after three strikes.)*
*When you are poor and sick, you have two strikes against you.*

10 Phrasal verb

*be up against (nonseparable)—be faced with opposition, trouble, or hard work*
*My friend is up against a lot of problems.*
*When he started his own business, he had no idea what he was up against.*

6—
Ahead Of

1 Ahead of means closer to a destination than or in front of.
*My friend arrived first, and was ahead of me in line.*

2 Ahead of means before.
*You are in a hurry; please go ahead of me.*
3 Ahead of can mean more advanced than.
*Because he was absent for two weeks, the other students in his class are ahead of him.*

4 Phrasal verbs

get ahead (intransitive)—succeed
*She has struggled all her life to get ahead.*

get ahead of (nonseparable)—advance faster or further than someone else
*They are rivals, always competing to get ahead of each other.*

go ahead (intransitive)—Do it; begin now
*I asked for permission, and they told me to go ahead.*

7—

Along

1 *Along* means following the boundary of something.

Pattern: verb + along + noun
*We walked along the water’s edge at the beach last night.*

Typical verbs before along:
*jog, stroll, run, walk*

2 *Along with* means together.

Pattern: verb + along with + noun
He used to sing along with me.

Typical verbs used before along with:
hum, play, run, sing, walk, work

3 Expressions

all along (adverb)—the whole past time
They have been enemies all along.

4 Phrasal verbs

get along (intransitive)—live together in harmony
She and her old roommate didn't get along.

get along with (nonseparable)—to live in harmony with someone
I hope she gets along with her new roommate.

8—
Among

1 Among can mean surrounded by.

Pattern: verb + among + plural (three or more) noun
They camped in the woods among the trees.

2 Among can mean with each other.

Pattern: verb + among + plural (three or more) noun
The children quarreled among themselves.
Typical verbs before among:
argue, celebrate, debate, discuss something, fight, play, share something, talk

3 Among can mean to the individuals in a group.

Pattern: verb + among + plural (three or more) noun
They distributed the flyers among the students.

Typical verbs before among:
distribute, hand out, pass out

4 Among can mean included in a group.
Your friends are among the survivors.

5 Among can indicate many of a group.
Latin dancing is popular among the college students.