

PREPOSITIONS

Examples of Prepositions: at by for from in of off on out over to up

Problem

Some prepositions are relatively easy to understand, especially the ones related to spatial relationships like location: The coffee pot is on the table by the door. and direction: We came from the library. / We went to the store.

To review prepositions of spatial relationships, see the page by that title at Purdue University's online writing lab (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>).

In other cases, the meaning of prepositions is more conceptual, or even completely idiomatic. Adding to the difficulty is having to remember which prepositions must be used in combination with certain verbs. Confused writers often choose arbitrarily or omit them entirely, but using the wrong preposition can distort meaning and mark writing as non-native.

Solutions

- **LOOK FOR PATTERNS**

Some prepositions express conceptual meanings that follow consistent patterns although they may be harder to recognize when unrelated to spatial relationships.

Example: **from** can carry the idea of *not* doing something
to has a positive sense of engagement, of doing something.

They were **restricted from** junk food. (They did not eat junk food.)

They were **restricted to** a low calorie diet. (They ate a low calorie diet.)

Our lack of coordination **kept us from** finishing on time. (We did not finish.)

We **kept to** our original plans. (We did what we had planned.)

Other examples of consistent patterns:

look, gaze, glance, smile, stare ... **at**

hope, look, wait, watch, wish ... **for**

- **INVESTIGATE THE VERB**

Some prepositions are closely associated with certain verbs, so if you don't know which preposition to use, look up the verb in a dictionary, especially one written for non-native speakers such as the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary American English* (available at <http://www.ldoceonline.com>). Also, remember that the meaning may change, depending on which preposition you choose.

Example: Run into We ran into him at the mall—what a pleasant surprise!
Run out We ran out of coffee—can somebody buy more?
Run up We ran up a high bill and didn't have enough cash.

Into? Out? Up? To find out, look up *run* for a full list of idiomatic expressions.

- **REMEMBER “TO BE”**

Some verb-preposition combinations must be used in the following pattern:

be + past participle (-ed ending) + preposition.

Examples:

be accustomed to
be composed of
be distinguished / differentiated from
be interested in

The city council **is concerned about** rising crime rates.

- **CONSIDER ALTERNATIVES**

In addition to choosing the correct preposition, keep in mind that most verb-preposition combinations are considered informal: they are used more often in conversation than in writing. Thus, an easy way to increase the academic formality of your writing is to choose one-word alternatives whenever possible. Examples:

Informal	More formal
hand in	submit
look into	investigate
put off	delay
run across	encounter

Expectations and levels of formality can vary, however, so we recommend that you note the preferences in your field, especially when writing at the graduate level.

- **KEEP A LIST**

There are so many verb-preposition combinations that it would be difficult to memorize them all. Try keeping an ongoing list of expressions used frequently in your field or that you have difficulty remembering. When corrections are made on your papers, add those examples of correct usage to your list to help you avoid making the same mistake again.

For a fuller list of verb-preposition combinations and phrasal verbs:

Azar, Betty Schramper. *Understanding and Using English Grammar*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1989. A24–A28.