

# Prepositions

## Introduction

Prepositions are words that show the relationship between a noun or pronoun and some other word or words.

**Here are some examples of prepositions.**

The book is **in** the box **beside** the table.

I will meet you **near** the library.

He lived **in** Australia **for** six years.

She has lived **with** him **since** 1980.

There is a grain **of** truth **in** that.

These little words have often caused confusion.

## Sentence structure

### Stilted Sentences

**Prepositions can occur at the end of a sentence.**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, grammarians promulgated the idea that a preposition should not be used at the end of a sentence. This was probably due to their misguided attempt to model "good English grammar" on Latin. Often when people attempt to rewrite a sentence to avoid placing a preposition in sentence final position the sentence becomes stilted. This is shown in the famous anecdote about Sir Winston Churchill. When confronted with an editor changing his writing to avoid putting a preposition in sentence final position, Churchill said

"This is the sort of English up with which I cannot put!"

If your attempt to avoid a preposition in sentence final position leads to a stilted sentence, leave the preposition at the end where it probably belongs.

## Unnecessary prepositions

**Do not use unnecessary prepositions.**

Can you find the unnecessary prepositions in the following sentences?

Where did the teacher go to?  
(eliminate **to**)

She threw the flowers out into the bin.  
(eliminate **out**)

He met up with his friend at the museum.  
(eliminate **up** and **with**)

He will come to the meeting later on.  
(eliminate **on**)

Take your elbows off of the table.  
(eliminate **of**)

Carve it up into four pieces.  
(eliminate **up**)

## Word choice

### of/have

Do not use "**of**" in place of "**have**".

Consider the following sentences.

The girl **could** see the cat.

The boy **has** seen the dog.

The baby **could have been** sleeping.

The teacher **will be** marking exams today.

The words in bold are modal verbs. They help readers understand whether an action has taken place. Prepositions are not modal verbs. Unfortunately, many people use "of" when they should use "have". The following sentences show this common mistake:

The driver **could of** driven faster. ✗

The driver **could have** driven faster. ✓

She **should of** taken notes. ✗

She **should have** taken notes. ✓

## between/among

Use "between" when two entities are involved and use "among" when more than two are involved.

You should say:

The teacher divided the chocolate **between** Mary and Fred.

*and*

The teacher divided the chocolates **among** her twenty students.

## Conjoining

When conjoining phrases that require two different prepositions make sure you use the two different prepositions.

Consider the following examples.

*Just as you should say*

She contributed **to** the discussion.

*and*

She learned **from** the discussion.

*so you should say*

She contributed **to** and learned **from** the discussion.

*You should not say*

She contributed and learned **from** the discussion.

# Prepositions Quiz

When you think you are ready, try the following quiz.

For each of the following eight sentences, choose the most appropriate word or words to fill in the blank.

1. She will give a presentation later ... the day.

- on in
- in

2. The clerk took the boxes ... the table.

- off
- off of

3. The client ... left that pen on the table.

- must have
- must of

4. They divided the reward money ... Sara, Mary, and John.

- among
- between

5. The secretary put the trash ... the bin.

- in
- out in

6. They ... ended the meeting earlier.

- should have
- should of

7. They divided the work ... three parts.

- up into
- into

8. He believed ... the changes to the system.

- believed and pushed for
- believed in and pushed for

## Answers

1. She will give a presentation later ... the day.

- on in ✗
- in ✓

✓ That's correct.

✗ No. This is unnecessarily verbose.

2. The clerk took the boxes ... the table.

- off ✓
- off of ✗

✓ Yes. That's correct.

✗ Incorrect.

3. The client ... left that pen on the table.

- must have ✓
- must of ✗

✓ That's right. It would be wrong to use the preposition "of" after "must". You need the modal verb "have".

✗ No.

4. They divided the reward money ... Sara, Mary, and John.

- among ✓
- between ✗

✓ That's correct. It is divided among more than two people.

✗ No. Notice that more than two people are mentioned.

5. The secretary put the trash ... the bin.

- in ✓
- out in ✗

✓ Correct.

✗ No. This is too verbose.

6. They ... ended the meeting earlier.

- should have ✓
- should of ✗

✓ Yes. You cannot ever write "should of".

✗ No. You should never write "should of".

7. They divided the work ... three parts.

- up into ✗
- into ✓

✓ Yes.

✗ No.

8. He believed ... the changes to the system.

- believed and pushed for ✗
- believed in and pushed for ✓

✓ Yes. You need to use the prepositions required by both verbs.

✗ No.