

What are Prepositions?

Prepositions are abstract words that have no concrete meaning. They merely show the relationships between groups of words. A good way to test if a word is a preposition is to position it in front of phrases like "the box" or "the sides of the box" and see if the phrase makes sense. For prepositions concerning time, try positioning the preposition in front of a phrase like "the movie." (This rule works for about nine out of ten prepositions).

For example,

across the box
under the box
without the box

around the box
near the box
along the sides of the box

on top of the box
into the box
among the boxes.

Such a phrase that begins with a preposition is called a **prepositional phrase**. The noun that comes after a preposition or concludes the prepositional phrase is called the **object of a preposition**. Here is a list of the most common prepositions.

Prepositions:

aboard
above
across
after
along
among
around
at
before
behind

below
beside
besides
between
beyond
but
by
down
during
for
from
in

inside
into
near
of
off
on
outside
over
past
since
though
till

to
toward
towards
under
until
upon
with
within
without

Should I end a sentence with a preposition?

Grammarians in the seventeenth and eighteenth century claimed writers should never end with a preposition. This idea was completely new-fangled in English. Before that time it was done without anyone complaining, yet now it is grammatical law!

In the daily speech of British folk, the most common dialects still conform to this rule. The British tend to say, "To what place was the package sent?" or "For what purpose is that machine made?" On the other hand, in many U.S. dialects, it is a common Americanism to say, "What place was the package sent to?" or "What is that machine for?" These phrasings sound acceptable (but a little low class) to most Americans, and it is probably permissible to go ahead and end the sentence with a preposition in informal writing. In more formal writing, or when writing for a British audience, it might be wise to go ahead and follow the rule (even if it is artificial).

The most important tip is to avoid sentences that sound awkward or confuse the reader. An editor supposedly chastised one writer, variously said to be Mark Twain or Winston Churchill, for ending a sentence with a preposition. The author retorted, "Ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put!" His retort neatly illustrates the point that slavishly following grammatical rules can be just as devastating to good taste as breaking the rules for the sake of clarity and style. Always make the choice that avoids the awkward sentence.