

# Prepositions (Week 4)

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NLN 100 Language & Writing Skills – 1

## 1 What are prepositions?

- Prepositions, as the name suggests, are words positioned **before** some X in the sentence. This X is the noun phrase (NP).
- Prepositions create relationships between two (groups of) words. They often tell us about
  - direction of actions
  - the location of things/people
  - the time of an action
  - the duration of an action
- Observe the usage of prepositions in the following sentences. Mark out the NPs in front of which each preposition is positioned. Also think about what the preposition tells us about (time/place/direction of action).
  - (1) The man standing **under** the lamppost is wearing a hat
  - (2) The bag **beside** the door is Amina's.
  - (3) Please walk **towards** the building.
  - (4) Sheela gave the gift **to** Rahim.
  - (5) Meet me **at** 3 PM.
  - (6) Meet me **in** an hour.
  - (7) Let's meet **for** an hour.
- Note that what are “pre-positions” in English are “post-positions” in your language, meaning they are positioned **after** the NP. Think of how you would express the example sentences above in your language? What post-positions would you get?
- Mastering the usage of English prepositions is tricky, since which prepositions are allowed in front of which NPs is particular to the English language.
- Thankfully, prepositions, unlike verbs and nouns are a “closed class” of words, meaning it is extremely rare for neologisms in the category of prepositions. This means new prepositions are hardly ever born.

## 2 Not a one-to-one relationship

- A preposition may be used to express two functions and does not necessarily have a fixed meaning. Look at the following examples:
  - (8) The story **by** Manto moved me.
  - (9) I will pay **by** debit card
  - (10) This book was given to me **by** my mother.
  - (11) Is it easier to get to Madagascar **by** boat or by air?

(12) He tried to open the bottle **by** twisting the cap anticlockwise.

(13) I received his reply **by** email

(14) The school **by** the river has no playground.

- A single bit of meaning can many a times be expressed by more than one preposition [see (15) and (16) for an illustration].

(15) a. I have kept a plant **in** the room

b. I have kept a plant **inside** the room

(16) a. The basket is **next to** the table.

b. The basket is **beside** the table.

### 3 Prepositions are sometimes meaningless

- Prepositions that are part of what are called ‘phrasal verbs’ are usually meaningless.
- Phrasal verbs have idiomatic meanings: the meaning of the whole does not correspond to meaning of its individual components. Observe the meaning of the following phrasal verbs (some of these have other meanings too):

1. put on — wear, to pretend

2. put away — store something where it belongs

3. put across — communicate effectively

4. put up with — tolerate

5. put down — to insult, to stop, to kill an animal

6. put up at — to stay at

7. put up — to display, to build

### 4 Ending sentences with prepositions

- Pedants and those who believe language should be used in a particular way — meaning grammar is fixed and not subject to change — prescribe that sentences should never end in prepositions. This rule is archaic, having origins in a time when it was fashionable to make English sound like Latin, a language that does not allow its sentences to end in prepositions.
- You should not be concerned with prescriptive grammar rules but rather want to speak and write in a way that most of your target audience understands you.
- The fact is that people do end their sentences with prepositions.

(17) Whom did you give the letter to?

(18) Whom are you with?

(19) What is the journey for?

Watch this, where Emily Brewster, an Associate Editor at Merriam-Webster explains how it is okay to end sentences with prepositions. Also read John McWhorter, professor of linguistics at Columbia university, talking about how The ‘Rule Against Ending Sentences With Prepositions Has Always Been Silly’.