

Grammar Preview 2: Prepositions and Prepositional Phrases

This preview of basic grammar covers the following: how to determine which words in a sentence are prepositions, and how to identify prepositional phrases. At the end of this preview we'll practice identifying prepositions and prepositional phrases in sentences. To understand how prepositions work, you have to be able to identify the nouns in a sentence. If you feel at all uncertain about your ability to do that, please review the first grammar preview presentation on nouns and adjectives.

The Basic Grammar of Prepositions. Prepositions are small words which indicate place, motion, cause, time, manner, and the like. Those which indicate place include “in, at, on, near, beside, along, among, over, under.” Among those betokening motion are “from, toward, up, down, around, into, onto” and so on. Others show cause, such as “because of, for, by, with, out of.” English has around one hundred and fifty small words that can be used as prepositions. Here are a few of the most common: “about, above, across, after” and the rest of the words on this slide. However, not all small words in English are prepositions, for instance, what are probably the two most frequently used small words in English “the” and “a/n,” which represent a different part of speech, what grammarians call “articles.” Another type of small word which isn't a preposition is called a “conjunction,” e.g. “and, or, but, since.” Conjunctions link two or more things, actions, ideas, etc. Yet another type of small word that's not a preposition is the adverb. Adverbs include words like “very, well, soon, there, now,” and in the same way that adjectives modify nouns, adverbs modify verbs, adjectives or other adverbs. Adverbs are yet another part of speech. Finally, interjections are also small words that aren't prepositions. Interjections include exclamations like “oh!, darn!, ouch!, please!” These are often associated with the expression of strong emotion or surprise, or pleading. Thus, they're often followed by an exclamation point. Zounds!

Back to prepositions. The basic function of prepositions is to show how a noun relates to the rest of the sentence. That noun is called the “object of the preposition,” which we'll abbreviate as “OP.” When we encounter OP's in this presentation, we'll color them a nice rusty red to make them stand out. The prepositions themselves we'll color brown, and once we figure out how to identify a prepositional phrase, we'll surround the whole thing with parentheses to set it off from the rest of the sentence since it's an independent structure in terms of grammar. The word “preposition” means literally “pre- [“before”] -position [“placed”], because a preposition almost always precedes its object. Actually, “preposition” is kind of a dumb name for this part of speech — the same could be said for articles like “the” which usually precede *the* word they go with, and titles like “sir” as in Sir Lancelot — but I can't think of any better name than preposition. To call them what they actually are, “locational-motional-causal markers,” just seems like the wrong direction to go *in*.

Here are a few examples of prepositional phrases: “the man in the house”: “in the house” is a prepositional phrase, made up of “in” the preposition and “house” its object, the OP. “The man” isn't part of the prepositional phrase but we'll talk about how it relates to the prepositional phrase in a moment. “no one from this city”: “from this city” is the prepositional phrase, “from” is the preposition and “city” is the OP; “stronger because of your courage”: “because of your courage” is the prepositional phrase, “because of” is a two-word cluster creating a single preposition, and

“courage” is the OP; “wandering through the darkness”: “through the darkness” is the prepositional phrase, “through” is the preposition and “darkness” is the OP; “he reacted with fear”: “with fear” is the prepositional phrase, “from” is the preposition and “fear” is the OP; and finally “taken by hand”: “by hand” is the prepositional phrase, “by” is the preposition and “hand” is the OP.

As long as you can identify what small words are prepositions — and that will come more easily with practice — determining and isolating prepositional phrases isn’t all that difficult. Before moving on to practicing that process, let’s talk about what prepositional phrases do.

Understanding that will help you identify them, too. In essence, prepositional phrases modify or describe something else in their sentence, so a prepositional phrase often acts like an adjective or adverb, a modifier of some sort. For instance, a prepositional phrase can tell you which man by identifying his location: “the man *in the house*.” So they’re another way of keeping down the number of nouns in English. In other words, when we deploy the prepositional phrase “in the house,” we save ourselves from having to create a whole special independent noun that means a “man in a house.” Without prepositions and adjectives, we’d have very fat dictionaries.

Prepositions can also tell you why some situation exists, e.g. “We are all stronger *because of your courage*.” The preposition “because of” gives the reason we’re stronger, i.e. your courage (the OP). Here, the prepositional phrase explains — or in grammatical terms “modifies” — the whole rest of the sentence. Prepositions can also show you how something happened: “He reacted with fear.” “With fear” shows the manner of his reaction. So in this sentence, the prepositional phrase modifies the action of the sentence, its verb (“reacted”) — we’ll talk about verbs in the next grammar preview — making “with fear” adverbial, not adjectival, here. So in essence, prepositions and their objects work together as modifiers. They delimit the possible meaning of a sentence.

But unlike nouns and adjectives, there’s no easy test to see whether a word’s a preposition or not. Instead, you just have to look for small words followed by a noun or nouns. And please note: there can be more than one OP. So when you’re looking for prepositional phrases, ask yourself if the small word and the noun following it work together to modify something else in the sentence. Do they, as a team, show the place where something happened or where it came from or why it took place? And remember this: you actually already know what a preposition is or you wouldn’t be able to speak or understand English. So this isn’t some sort of complicated math. When you start learning calculus, it’s hard because you don’t already know calculus. But you do actually already know prepositions. All you really have to learn here is how to recognize prepositions when you see them. The fact is, the only new or even vaguely complicated thing in this whole lesson is the term “preposition” itself and how that term applies to certain small words but not others. That’s the only challenge here.

So before we move on, let’s review how to distinguish a small word that’s a preposition from any other part of speech. It’s easy, for instance, to see the difference between prepositions and adverbs or interjections, because adverbs and interjections function very differently from prepositions. Adverbs and interjections aren’t often associated closely with nouns. For example “Hurray! (an interjection) Well done (‘well’ is an adverb)!” “Hurray” isn’t followed by anything, and “well” is followed by “done” which isn’t a noun. “The done”? “Dones”? “Well it”? “Done” passes none of the noun tests. There are no nouns here, and no nouns means no prepositional

phrases. “Hurray!” and “well” can’t be prepositions. Articles like “the, a” are another type of small word in English that could potentially be confused with prepositions because they’re also closely associated with nouns and come right in front of them usually. But articles aren’t hard to distinguish from prepositions either, because English has only two articles, “the” and “a/n.” Learn them, and you’re done learning the article in English.

The one part of speech which may give you a little trouble when you are filtering the prepositions out of a sentence is the conjunction, words like “and, either, or, but.” Just like prepositions, conjunctions are small words and they’re often followed by nouns. But conjunctions perform a very different function from prepositions. Conjunctions link two or more words, often nouns like “men *and* women” — “and” is the conjunction there — but they also link verbs (“come *and* go”), adjectives (“big *or* small”) or actually any other part of speech, even prepositions: “I saw people going to *and* from the house.” But note something here: only when conjunctions are linking nouns, will you have any possibility of confusing them with prepositions. Prepositions, remember, have to have nouns as their objects. So small words in front of another part of speech like a verb or an adjective can’t be prepositions. They have to be conjunctions or adverbs or something else. But what really distinguishes conjunctions and prepositions and the test you’ll need to perform to be absolutely sure a word is a preposition, not a conjunction, is their very different functions. Conjunctions link things. They don’t show place or motion or cause, the way prepositions do. Remember, too: it’s only small words we’re talking about here, one or two syllables mostly, words like “in, on, at, from, by, beside, beneath.” Those are all prepositions, not conjunctions, because they show the location of something. They don’t simply link two things. “The man in the house”? “In” is a preposition. “The man and the house”? “And” is a conjunction.

Besides that, there’re not that many small words in English — it’s a pretty small list as any Scrabble player will tell you! — and a healthy percentage of them is prepositions. Chances are you’ll see more prepositions on any particular page of text in English than interjections or conjunctions. In that last sentence, for instance, there are three prepositions (“on, in, of”) but only two conjunctions (“than, or”) and no interjections. Darn!

Now finally, let’s practice identifying prepositions (which, as I said before, we’ll put in brown) and their objects (which we’ll put in rusty red) and, in doing so, isolate prepositional phrases (which we’ll put in parentheses). First example: “I walked into the house.” “Into” is a preposition. “House” is its object, the OP. So the prepositional phrase is “into the house.” Here’s another example: “When in Rome eat lasagna.” “In” is the preposition, “Rome” is its object, and so “in Rome” is the prepositional phrase. “With suffering comes wisdom.” “With” is the preposition, the OP is “suffering,” creating the prepositional phrase “with suffering.” You getting it? Let’s see. Here’s another example: “They waded out of the ocean.” What’s the preposition? Good! “Out of”! Like “because of,” sometimes a single preposition is made up of a two-word cluster, but usually two small words. And what’s the object of “out of”? What did they wade out of? “The ocean.” That’s the OP. So the prepositional phrase is ... “out of the ocean.”

Think you’re ready to dive into the deep end now? Let’s look at a whole paragraph and find the prepositional phrases: [Publius Vergilius Maro, a name with Etruscan overtones, was born in the small village of Andes near Mantua in October of 70 BCE. His father came from humble

origins but attained enough social status that he could give the best possible education to his son. Initially Vergil dabbled in rhetoric and law but abandoned them over time.] Oh my interjection! That looks like a lot of words. But you don't have to know the grammar of them all, only the prepositions and their objects. So look for the small words and see if they have a noun after them, which raises another point you should bear in mind here. Prepositions have to have nouns.

So let's start this analysis by practicing what we did in the last grammar preview, identifying nouns. Remember how to do that? Nouns are things, ideas, names, and so on. In front of most nouns you can put the article "the/a," or you can pluralize them, or replace them with pronouns like "he/him," "she/her," "they/them" or "it." So which words in this paragraph are nouns? I count nineteen — that is, if you treat Publius Vergilius Maro, the full name of the Roman poet Vergil, as three separate nouns — if you count Publius Vergilius Maro as only one noun, then there are only seventeen. Only seventeen! Right. Pause this presentation and see if you can isolate the seventeen (or nineteen) nouns in this paragraph. Got them all? Here they are.

Now let's identify the prepositions and their objects and thus which words are prepositional phrases in this paragraph. Remember: prepositions are small words that come in front of nouns — sometimes directly, sometimes there's an adjective and/or article in between the preposition and its object — and they're not conjunctions like "and," or adverbs like "well," or articles like "a." So is "a name" a prepositional phrase? No. That noun ("name") must then not be part of a prepositional phrase. Lots of nouns aren't. Let's move on. Look in front of the next noun "overtones." Does it have a small word in front of it? No. What about "Etruscan"? It's an adjective. But wait! What about the word in front of "Etruscan"? "With"? Is that a preposition? It's small and it works together with "[Etruscan] overtones" to describe "name," doesn't it? "With Etruscan overtones" tells you what type of name Vergil had. So, yes, "with" is a preposition with "overtones" as its object, which means the prepositional phrase is "with Etruscan overtones." See how to do it? Let's find another preposition. Look in front of the next noun "village." "Small" is certainly a small word but is it a preposition? No, it's an adjective. It tells you what kind of village. What about "a"? What did we say about "a"? Is "a" a preposition? No, it's an article. So then what about "in"? Small word, goes with "village" and it creates a phrase that tells you where Vergil was born, the place of his birth, a location. That's something prepositions often do. So "in" is a preposition. And what's its object? "Village"! Good! That means the prepositional phrase is "in the small village": preposition ("in"), article ("the"), adjective ("small"), noun ("village").

What's the next noun? "Andes," a name. Does it have a small word in front of it? Sure does: "of." So, is "of" a preposition? Definitely! With the OP ... "Andes," making the prepositional phrase "of Andes," which clarifies (i.e. modifies) the word "village." Yes, one prepositional phrase can be attached to another. In fact, there can be and often are strings of them. For instance, what's the next noun and does it have a preposition? "Mantua," another name, which is preceded by "near," a small word that shows Andes' location. So "near" must be a preposition, "Mantua" its object, and the preposition phrase must be "near Mantua." Three prepositional phrases in a row. Can there be four? Let's see. Next noun? "October." It has "in" right in front of it. Can it be? Yes, "in" is a preposition, "October" is its object, and "in October" is the prepositional phrase. That's got to be it! Surely, there can't be another preposition after that! Five prepositional phrases in a row? Oh, interjection! But let's check anyway. Next noun "70

BCE.” Yep, numbers and dates can be nouns, too, when they serve as things in a sentence. Any small word in front of “70 BCE”? Yes, “of.” Seriously? Another prepositional phrase? “Of” is a preposition, “70 BCE” is its object, so “of 70 BCE” must be a prepositional phrase. Five prepositional phrases in succession! There should be a word for that. A prepositional jam? Next noun? “Father.” Does it have a small word in front of it? Yes, “his.” But that’s a modifier telling you whose father (Vergil’s). That doesn’t create a small independent phrase like “with his father” or “by his father.” “His” is just an adjective like “nice, humble,” so there’s no preposition here. Next noun? “Origins,” which has an adjective in front of it, “humble,” but is there a small word in front of that? Yes, “from,” and “from” goes with the noun “origins.” So we have another preposition “from,” with an OP “origins,” making a prepositional phrase “from humble origins.” Doing okay? Seeing how to maneuver your way through a forest of words like this to find the prepositions and their objects? Okay, stay strong! What’s the next noun? “Status.” Is there a small word in front of it? “Social”? No, that’s too big to be a “small word,” and it describes the type of status, so it must be an adjective. What about “enough”? Is “enough status” a prepositional phrase? No, “enough” modifies “(social) status.” “Enough” must be an adjective, not a preposition then, because it’s not creating a phrase that modifies something else in the sentence.

What’s the next noun in this passage? “Education.” Is there a preposition in front of it? “The best possible”? Are any of those words prepositions? “The” is an article followed by two adjectives, “best” and “possible.” So, no! No preposition there, which means no prepositional phrase. Next noun? “Son.” It’s preceded by “to his.” “His,” we’ve seen, is an adjective — “his father,” remember? — but what about “to”? Small word, works with “son” to show where Vergil’s father put his efforts, a location, so ... “to” must be a preposition, having the noun “son” as its object, which creates the prepositional phrase “to his son.” Next noun? “Rhetoric” — that means “public speaking” — does it have a small word in front of it? Yes, “in,” so is that a preposition? Guess so! With “rhetoric” as its object, creating the prepositional phrase “in rhetoric.” Now what about “law,” the next noun? What does that go with? Is that part of the same prepositional phrase as “rhetoric”? “In rhetoric and law”? Is that one preposition with two objects? One preposition can have multiple objects, almost always linked by conjunctions like “and”? So the prepositional phrase is longer than just “in rhetoric.” It’s “in rhetoric and law,” one preposition and two nouns, both acting as OP’s. The last noun in this passage is “time.” Is there a small word in front of it? Yes, “over.” Does “over time” show how Vergil abandoned law and rhetoric? Definitely does. So “over” is a preposition, “time” is its object, and the prepositional phrase is “over time.”

Whew! One paragraph with *ten* prepositional phrases. English uses prepositions a lot, wouldn’t you say? To prove that point, here’s another paragraph full of prepositions: [When he was in his early twenties, civil war broke out between the Roman generals Caesar and Pompey and ended in the latter’s defeat at the Battle of Pharsalus. Politics quickly developed into a dangerous and inadvisable career path. Vergil turned instead to poetry, imitating the new style of verse seen in his contemporary Catullus’ work.] Just like before, let’s start with the nouns. There are seventeen again, counting the names “Caesar” and “Pompey” which just restate the noun “generals,” so those three nouns operate as one big cluster in sense, but grammatically they’re all separate nouns. Also watch out for possessives like “latter’s” in line four and “Catullus’” at the bottom of the page! Adding this sort of apostrophe to a noun makes it act like an adjective showing possession but as a part of speech it’s still a noun. Mark possessives like “latter’s” and

“Catullus” as nouns for this exercise and then ignore them. We’re not studying possessive forms here. So including “Caesar,” “Pompey,” “latter” and “Catullus,” there are seventeen nouns here. Can you find them? Pause the presentation and, when you’re done, I’ll show you the answers. Here are the nouns.

Now let’s see if you can identify which nouns belong to prepositional phrases, starting with the first “twenties.” Does it have a preposition in front of it? Yes, “in,” after you recognize that “his” and “early” are both adjectives. So “in” is a preposition, “twenties” is its object, meaning the prepositional phrase is “in his early twenties.” Next noun, “war”? No small word in front of it. “Civil” is an adjective. So “war” is not part of a prepositional phrase. Next noun? “Generals.” Does it have a preposition in front of it? “The Roman” is a combination of the article “the” plus the adjective “Roman.” But what about “between”? It shows where the war took place, a location, so “between” must be a preposition, with “(the Roman) generals” as its object. And since the passage goes on to cite those generals by name, “Caesar and Pompey,” the prepositional phrase runs rather long: “between the Roman generals Caesar and Pompey.” A bit more complicated than usual, but I think you’re getting the hang of this now.

So let’s accelerate this process a little. Can you find the next noun that has a preposition directly (or closely) in front of it? Yes, “(latter’s) defeat.” Remember: as we just said, ignore the possessive “latter’s”! Here, “in” must be a preposition, “defeat” its object, and “in the latter’s defeat” must be the full prepositional phrase. Next? Find a small word that goes with a noun and creates a phrase that describes something. Can you find it? Good! “At”! At what? What’s its object? “the Battle,” so “at the Battle” is a prepositional phrase. Next preposition? Look at the very next word! “Of.” “Of” is a preposition. Of what? “Of Pharsalus”! Pharsalus is a place in Greece, that shows location, so “of Pharsalus” has to be a prepositional phrase. Moving on, what’s the next small word closely preceding and connected with a noun that creates a descriptive phrase? That’s right! “Into.” But into what? Whoa! There are a lot of adjectives here. “Dangerous, inadvisable and career” all clarify what kind of “path.” “Path”! That’s the noun that serves as the object of “into,” making the preposition phrase at heart “into the path” with a bunch of adjectives interposed: “into the dangerous and inadvisable career path.” Next preposition? Can you see it? Good! “To”! To what? To “poetry.” So “to poetry” is the next prepositional phrase. And in the next line is there a preposition? Yes, two of them! The first is “of,” “of verse,” and the second one is “in”: “in his contemporary Catullus’ ... work.” “Work”! That’s the object of “in.” “In ... work” shows location, that is, where Vergil found the model for his poetry. “His contemporary Catullus”? That’s just a string of modifiers, centering around a possessive (“Catullus”), all describing “work.” The preposition “in” and the OP “work” make up the heart of this prepositional phrase. Getting it now? Come on!

Here’s another paragraph farced full of prepositions, five in fact: [Vergil’s first important publication, *The Eclogues* ("Selections"), imitated the pastoral poems of a Greek poet Theocritus. It was very successful, establishing his reputation among poets and opening the door for him to begin work on a longer poem in four books, *The Georgics* ("Farming").] Let’s approach this one differently. Now that you’re aware of what a preposition is and you’ve seen quite a number of them, you find the prepositions! Somewhere in this presentation you’ve seen all the prepositions included here. Where is the first preposition in this paragraph? Is there one in the first line? No. How about line two? Huh-uh. Line three? Yes, “of.” Next preposition? Line four? No. Line five.

What about “among”? Yeah, that’s a preposition. Line six? I see one. Right! “For”! But what about “to”? That’s a preposition, too, isn’t it? Like we saw above, “to poetry”? But is “begin” a noun? Does it pass any of the noun-tests? “The begin”? Can you have two “begins”? In this sentence can you replace “begin” with a pronoun like “it”? No to all three, so “begin” is not a noun. We’ll learn in the next grammar preview this is a verb. The only thing that matters here, though, is that “begin” isn’t a noun, and prepositions have to have nouns as their objects, so the “to” here is not a preposition. Let’s move on. Next line? See any prepositions? I see two. [T-W-O!] “On” and “in.”

Now let’s go back to the beginning and figure out the prepositional phrases that go with these prepositions, starting with “of” in line three. “Of what, or whom”? “Of . . . a Greek poet Theocritus.” That’s the prepositional phrase, a hefty one. “Poet,” a noun, is the OP; the name “Theocritus” just clarifies the word “poet.” How about the next preposition “among”? “Among what or whom”? “Poets”! So the prepositional phrase is . . . “among poets.” How about “for” in the next line? “For whom”? “Him”! A pronoun, but they’re the equivalent of nouns so they can and often do serve as OP’s. So the prepositional phrase is “for him.” Simple enough. Next preposition? “On”? What’s its object? “. . . a longer poem.” “Poem” is its OP, so the prepositional phrase is “on a longer poem.” “Longer” is just an adjective. And finally “in.” In what? “In . . . (four) books.” “Books” is the OP — “four” is just an adjective — so the prepositional phrase is “in four books.” You’ve got it now, haven’t you? So it’s time to step up the pace again.

Here’s another paragraph: [In accordance with the tastes of his day, *The Eclogues* and *The Georgics* followed the style of later Greek verse in terms of both their sentiment and execution. For example, they have Greek, not Latin titles. While neither runs anywhere near the length of Homer’s epics, Vergil took a long time publishing them because of his perfectionism.] Let’s go straight to identifying the prepositional phrases in this passage, starting at the beginning. What’s the first prepositional phrase? Good! “In accordance”: “in” preposition, “accordance” the OP. Next? “With the tastes”: “with” preposition, “(the) tastes” OP. Next? “Of his day.” Whoa, three prepositional phrases in a row, but that’s hardly a surprise, huh? Not after five in a row like we saw above! Go on! Next prepositional phrase? Hint, hint. It’s in the third line. Yes! “Of later Greek verse.” Which word is the OP here? “Verse”! “Later” and “Greek” are two adjectives. Next prepositional phrase? It starts in the same line. Look for a small word. It must be . . . “in terms”: “in” preposition, “terms” OP. Next? “Of both their sentiment and execution.” Oh my, two OP’s! But that’s no surprise either, is it? We’ve seen that before too. Next? “For example.” Yeah, “for” is a preposition and “example” is its object. What’s the next prepositional phrase? [Look in line seven.] Bingo! “Near the length”! It tells you how, in this case, how long the poem runs. Next? Look at what comes next! “Of Homer’s epics.” I told you to ignore possessives, so don’t worry about “Homer’s”? All you need to know here is that “of” is the preposition and “epic” is the OP. Any more prepositions in this paragraph? Alas (interjection), yes! (interjection). “Because of his perfectionism.” Remember “because of,” that two-word preposition which shows cause? Good! That went well! So let’s try warp speed!

Here’s another paragraph: [A meticulous worker, he revised and revised a line until it suited his taste to perfection. Thus, he composed these poems at the rate of about one line per day. While he was, in his own words, “licking this poetry into shape,” the Roman world about him was exploding into war.] [Getting tired of Vergil yet? Well, don’t! He’s my hero. You should learn

Latin just to read his masterpiece *The Aeneid*. There's nothing like it in all of literature and it's impossible to translate. You just have to experience it in the original. So when you come to the banquet of Latin, know that Vergil will be your dessert.] Okay, there are eight prepositional phrases in this paragraph. Pause this presentation and find them. Got them all? Sure you did! You're the Prefect of Prepositions!

To end this presentation, I'll give you four more paragraphs of text with prepositional phrases, and I won't tell you how many there are. You figure it out! Here's the first one: [Julius Caesar's assassination in 44 BCE had left Rome broken into two factions, one supporting Caesar and the other detesting and reviling his legacy. Caesar's lieutenant Mark Antony and the assassins Brutus and Cassius assembled their legions at Philippi in eastern Macedonia, and when the battle was over, the pro-Caesarians had won.] Pause the presentation, dig out the prepositions and their phrases, and then check your answers. Do that for the three passages after this one, and by the time you're done, you'll be ready to go to the next grammar preview on verbs. *Valete, discipuli!*

[But Antony had no time to relish this victory. Caesar's great nephew and heir, Octavian, stepped to the foreground of Roman politics and forced Antony out of Rome, who subsequently sought support from Egypt and Caesar's former ally, Cleopatra VII, a distant descendant of Alexander's general Ptolemy. Octavian's and Antony's conflict quickly escalated.]

[In a naval battle off Actium on the western shore of Greece, Octavian defeated Antony and Cleopatra who later committed suicide. With both these threats erased, Octavian assumed the title Augustus meaning "the Holy One" and consolidated his hold on the Roman state, imposing peace through force.]

[The Battle of Actium inaugurated an empire which endured for over five hundred years. Amidst this upheaval all the carnage and chaos Vergil witnessed left him with a dark view of human life, a scar amply visible in the many sorrows his poems describe.]