TEMPORAL, SPATIAL & DIRECTIONAL PREPOSITIONS

Definition

In English, prepositions are words that identify roles and relationships within a sentence. Prepositions are used to communicate temporal, spatial, or directional relationships, and they can be concrete or abstract. Using the correct preposition in English is key to describing relationships accurately.

Temporal Prepositions

Prepositions that describe points in time are at, in and on.

On is used to determine days, at is used to express time of day, and in is used with parts of the day that are not defined by specific times, with months and years, and with the seasons.

For example:

We finished the research at 5 pm.

We finished the research on June 5.

We finished the research in the morning.

Prepositions that express lengths of time are: since, for, by, from, and during.

For example:

We have been doing this research since the start of the semester.

We have been doing this research for three months.

We plan to finish this research by June 5.

We planned to research from fall to spring.

We will complete this research during the spring semester.
Spatial Prepositions

Spatial prepositions include at, in, and on; these prepositions relate directly to the point that is being described.

At can be used to describe a vicinity, on describes a surface and in describes an area that is restricted to boundaries.

For example:

We did our research at the library.

We did our research on campus.

We did our research in the lab.

Abstract uses of these prepositions can also be used and the same rules should apply.

For example:

This is groundbreaking research in the engineering field.

Locational prepositions can also express proximity; prepositions that determine proximity include over, under, between, near, around, within, and above. They can also be abstract.

For example:

This research happens under the supervision of an advisor.

We found the answers between two data points.

The data is within the range that we expected.

Our office is near the lab, but not next to it.
Directional Prepositions

Directional prepositions express the movement of a noun. These include to, through, from and toward.

To is used to express approaching something, and it can be abstract—a person having something done “to” them is still directional.

For example,

I am going to the lab.

We gave the results to our advisor.

Through describes movement between two points that is linear.

For example:

We had to get through the literature review before we began our methodology.

From is used to express the concept of starting at a specified point.

For example:

We had to start from these findings in order to get our best results.

Toward is also an approach like “to” but can be temporal as it means the noun has not reached a specified point yet.

For example:

We are working toward a better research method but have not achieved it yet.