

Prepositions of place, direction, movement

Introduction



The family is sitting **on** a bench **in** the garden.

Grandpa is **on** the left and mum and dad are **at** the back. Grandma is **in** the middle, **between** the children. The dog is **on** the right.

Prepositions of place

These prepositions give us information about where something is located. The following tables give some guidelines and examples but note that you may hear some variations depending on sentence structure, context and regional variations.

In, on, at

Uses	Examples
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in	An enclosed space Towns, cities, states, countries, continents etc. Other large areas Roads Pictures and documents Some (smaller) forms of transport	in a box, a bag, a room, a cupboard, a cup in Birmingham, Kent, California, Japan, Asia in the countryside, a neighbourhood, a district, a park, a car park, a garden, the world in a street, a road, an avenue, the High Street, Bingley Road [UK] in a picture, a photo, a painting, a report, an email, a contract, a newspaper, a magazine in a car, a taxi, a helicopter, an open boat
on	A surface - horizontal or vertical Transport and travel Some locations	on the table, the wall, a shelf, a screen on page 2, the front cover of the book, the menu on a plate, a face, a head on a bus, train, a boat, a ship, a bike, skis, a flight, a trip, a journey, a picnic, a bike ride, a break, holiday on the left, the right, the side, the coast, the beach, the 2nd floor on an island, a farm, a college campus on a road/street/avenue etc. [mainly US] on a motorway, the High Street, Oxford Street [i.e. main roads]
on (the) top of	At the highest point of something tall or high	on top of a cupboard, wardrobe, a hill, a mountain

at	Some locations that are buildings	at the cinema, the theatre, the pub, a restaurant, work, home, school, university
	Some other locations	at the beach, the lake
	A point on a journey	at a junction, traffic lights, a corner, a bus stop
	An address	at 88 Bingley Road, 10 Downing Street
	Positions	at the back, the front, the top, the bottom, the end

'In', 'on' or 'at'?

Sometimes there is more than one possibility depending on the context. For example:

The children are playing **on** the beach. [They are **on** the sand.]

The children are **at** the beach. [**on** the sand or **in** the area nearby.]

There's a chemist **on** the corner. [permanent position]

Let's meet **at** the corner. [a point on a journey]

It was very hot **in** the theatre/office/museum. [emphasis on 'inside']

I was **at** the theatre/office/museum when you called. [general location]

I'll meet you **in** the restaurant. [inside]

I'll meet you **at** the restaurant. [inside or outside]

I'm **in** the office. [inside the office]

I'm **at** the office. [**at** work generally - **in** an office or the canteen, a meeting room etc.]

He's **in** the water. [swimming]









He's **on** the water. [**in** a boat]

I'm sitting **at** my desk. [**on** a chair]









My computer is **on** my desk.

The Eurostar stops **at** Ebbsfleet and Ashford and arrives **in** Lille at 9.30. [or '**at** Lille (station)']

Other prepositions of place

	Uses	Examples
above 	Higher than	Our plane is now above the clouds. Let's put the shelf on this wall above the TV.
below 	Lower than	When we looked out of the plane, the people below us seemed really small. She had a cut on her leg, below the knee.
over 	Higher than	Our plane is now over the clouds. Let's put the shelf on this wall over the TV.
under underneath beneath 	Directly below	The cat's under the table. The tunnel's beneath the road. There's a cellar underneath the kitchen.
opposite 	On the other side of something	I sat opposite James at the meeting. The bank is opposite the station.
across 	On the other side of something	Where is the bank? It's across the road. She sits across the room (from me.)
inside 	An enclosed space [similar to 'in' but it can emphasise a contrast with 'outside']	I'll meet you inside the hotel because it's raining. Prices are lower if you sit inside the restaurant rather than on the terrace.
outside 	Not in an enclosed space but near to it	They're waiting for us outside the conference room. The smoking area is just outside my office.

<p>near</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>A short distance from</p>	<p>"Is the hotel near the station?" "Yes, it's just a 5-minute walk away." We live near the sea. [up to a few km away]</p>
<p>up</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>down</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>Along or further along a road, river etc.</p>	<p>I live up/down this street. [from the current location] We're staying in a hotel up/down the beach from here. Note that in the examples above, 'up' or 'down' can be used with no difference in meaning.</p>
<p>next to</p> <p>beside</p> <p>alongside</p> <p>by</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>Adjacent to, at the side of [closer than near]</p>	<p>We live next to the sea. [a few metres away - we can see it] Let's put the chair beside the window. I parked my car alongside yours. Come and sit by me.</p>
<p>behind</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>At the back of</p>	<p>The car park is behind the shopping centre.</p>
<p>in front of</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>Just ahead of or close to the front part of something</p>	<p>The shopping centre is in front of the car park. There's a statue in front of the fountain.</p>
<p>around</p> <p>round [mainly UK]</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>1. On every side or in a circular way.</p> <p>2. Just past a corner, after turning it</p> <p>3. 'Near', in this area.</p>	<p>They sat around/round a table. There are lots of restaurants around/round the square. Where's the station; is it far? No, it's around/round the next corner. Is there a station around/round here?</p>

among amongst [mainly UK] 	In a group or surrounded by other people or things	I sat among/amongst some Swedish people at the seminar. We found an important document among some old files.
between 	Having something on each side	The bank is between a supermarket and a book shop. My desk is between Harry's and Marie's.
beyond  	On the other side of	The river is beyond those trees.
within 	1. Inside an enclosed space or area 2. Not further than With both meanings, there is a suggestion of a boundary.	The total number of offices within the building is thirty. There are several gardens and cafés within the castle grounds. There are lots of different shops within 2 miles of my house.
from 	A point of origin	He lives in London now but he's from the north of England.
aboard 	On some vehicles	There are 210 passengers aboard this train. On our holiday, we spent three days aboard a boat.
against 	'next to' and close enough to be in contact	The cupboard is against the wall. He's allergic to cotton and can't have it against his skin.

'Opposite' or 'in front of'?

These are often confused. Sometimes, we can distinguish between them simply by considering the following examples:

There was a man **in front of** me on the bus. [I could see the back of his head.]
 There was a man **opposite** me at the meeting. [I could see his face.]

However, we use 'in front of' when talking about objects with 'screens':

She spends too much time **in front of** the mirror/tv/computer.

This is because we usually use 'in front of' when there is little or no space between things and 'opposite' when there is a greater distance:



There's one street lamp **in front of** my house and another one **opposite** my house.

Prepositions of movement

Prepositions of place indicate where something is and others tell us about movement from one place to another.

He's **at** work. [place]
 He's going **to** work. ✓ [movement]

Some prepositions can perform both functions:

The bank is **across** the road. [place]
 We walked **across** the road. [movement]

Here are some more examples:

Uses	Examples
onto [also 'on to']	Resulting in being 'on' They got onto the train. We loaded the goods onto the truck.

over	<p>To go higher than To cross something</p>	<p>We flew over the mountain. We went over the river/the road/the bridge.</p>
across	<p>With a verb like 'go' to mean 'to cross'</p>	<p>We went across the river/the road/the bridge. We walked across the square to get to the cathedral.</p>
into	<p>Resulting in being 'in'</p> <p>Resulting in being in direct contact with something</p>	<p>They got into the car. Put the files into that cabinet, please.</p> <p>He wasn't concentrating and he walked into the door.</p>
out of	<p>Resulting in being 'out'</p>	<p>They got out of the car. He threw it out of the window.</p>
inside	<p>Resulting in being in an enclosed space</p>	<p>Go inside the station and wait for me there; I won't be long.</p>
outside	<p>Resulting in being not 'in' but 'near' an enclosed space</p>	<p>He went outside the building to smoke.</p>
through	<p>Moving into one side and out of another</p> <p>Moving around in or from one side to another</p>	<p>You need to go through this door and through two offices to get to the canteen.</p> <p>We walked through the park/forest/market.</p>
up	<p>From a lower to a higher part of something</p> <p>To go further</p>	<p>We walked up the hill and found a nice café.</p> <p>We went up the street/road/river/beach.</p>
down	<p>From a higher to a lower part of something</p> <p>To go further</p>	<p>The children ran down the hill/the stairs.</p> <p>We went down the street/road/river/beach.</p>

<p>around round [mostly UK]</p>	<p>To go to several places in an area</p> <p>To go in an approximately circular direction</p>	<p>He travels around the world with his job.</p> <p>Go round the next corner and you'll see the post office.</p>
<p>along</p>	<p>To move in a constant direction</p>	<p>We drove along the motorway for 40 miles.</p> <p>I love walking along the beach at night.</p>
<p>past</p>	<p>To go further than something</p>	<p>You need to go past the bank and turn left.</p>
<p>from</p>	<p>Beginning a journey</p>	<p>We're coming from Heathrow.</p> <p>I get home from work at 7.00.</p>
<p>to</p>	<p>Reaching a destination</p> <p>Note that with the verb 'to arrive', we use 'at' or 'in':</p>	<p>They're getting a taxi to the airport and flying to Barcelona.</p> <p>I go to bed at 11.00.</p> <p>We arrived at the party/airport or in London/England etc.</p>
<p>towards [UK] toward [US]</p>	<p>To go in the direction of [might not be destination]</p>	<p>Drive towards the town centre and turn left at the next traffic lights.</p>
<p>off</p>	<p>To move down or away from</p>	<p>Get your feet off the table.</p> <p>The dog fell off the bed.</p>
<p>via</p>	<p>To travel to on the way to somewhere else</p>	<p>They flew to Australia via India.</p>
<p>aboard</p>	<p>To board some vehicles</p>	<p>We climbed aboard the boat/plane/helicopter/London Eye.</p>
<p>against</p>	<p>In the opposite direction</p>	<p>Driving into London at night is easy because it's against the commuter traffic.</p>

'In'/'into' and 'on'/'onto'

We often use 'in' and 'on' instead of 'into' and 'onto' to indicate movement. It can depend on the verb. For example, both can be used with 'get':

We got **on/onto** the train.
We got **in/into** the car.

With 'put', we are more likely to use 'in' and 'on':

I put my keys **in** my bag/**on** the table.

With 'go', 'walk', 'step' or 'jump', we use 'into' or 'onto':

He went **into** the boardroom 5 minutes ago.
She stepped **onto** the platform.
The cat jumped **onto** the table.

Sometimes, they are not interchangeable but have different meanings. For example:

We cycle **in** the village. [We cycle when we are **in** the village.]
We cycle **into** the village. [We cycle when we go **to** the village **from** another location.]

'In' and 'out'

As adverbs, these can be used alone to mean 'here' or 'not here':

"Can I speak to Jack, please?"
"Sorry, he's not **in** today. Can I take a message?" [not at work]

I'm the only person at home today. Everyone else is **out**. [not at home]

We're going **out** later, maybe to the cinema; we're not sure yet.

I didn't hear you come **in** last night; what time was it?

Expressions for giving directions

We use prepositions of place and movement when giving directions. Here are some

examples:

Drive **past** the church and take the first turning **on** the left. Go **along** this road for two miles and stop **at** the traffic lights. Go **over** the bridge and **through** a tunnel. Turn right when you come **to** a big shopping centre. Go **round** the roundabout and take the 3rd exit. Drive **towards** the town centre and park **near** the cathedral. Walk **across** the square and you'll find the tourist office **on** the corner **next to** a patisserie. I'll meet you there.

Other meanings and uses

Some prepositions of place and movement also function as adverbs.

For more information, see **Adverbs of time and place** and if in doubt, check in a good dictionary.

Also see **Prepositions with expressions**.

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