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

in	**An enclosed space**	**in a box, a bag, a room, a cupboard, a cup**
	Towns, cities, states, countries, continents etc.	**in Birmingham, Kent, California, Japan, Asia**
	Other large areas	
	Roads	**in the countryside, a neighbourhood, a district, a park, a car park, a garden, the world**
	Pictures and documents	**in a street, a road, an avenue, the High Street, Bingley Road [UK]**
	Some (smaller) forms of transport	**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**	**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**
	Transport and travel	**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**
	Some locations	**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. [swimmimg]
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.**

near	**A short distance from**	**"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]**
up **down**	**Along or further along a road, river etc.**	**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.**
next to **beside** **alongside** **by**	**Adjacent to, at the side of [closer than near]**	**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.**
behind	**At the back of**	**The car park is behind the shopping centre.**
in front of	**Just ahead of or close to the front part of something**	**The shopping centre is in front of the car park. There's a statue in front of the fountain.**
around **round [mainly UK]**	**1. On every side or in a circular way. 2. Just past a corner, after turning it 3. 'Near', in this area.**	**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?**

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

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

'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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