



Douglas College

Douglas College Learning Centre

PREPOSITIONS: IDIOMATIC USES OF PREPOSITIONS

Using correct prepositions in English can be very difficult. Some prepositions have meanings relating to time and place, but most preposition use is unpredictable. Prepositions are used idiomatically. In other words, there is no logical reason for most of the prepositions we use; we just use them. There are four main ways to learn these uses of prepositions.

- ◆ Read and listen a lot. Notice the prepositions used. Try to use them whenever possible. This method is slow, but it works. Unfortunately, when you are faced with a specific preposition problem, this method doesn't give you any short term way to solve the problem.
- ◆ Memorize common verbs, adjectives and nouns and the prepositions that go with them. Exercises such as those listed in the "For more work on prepositions" section at the end of this handout are useful. This is a good strategy for commonly used expressions, but English has so many possibilities that it won't deal with all the specific needs you have for preposition use.
- ◆ Ask a native English speaker.
- ◆ Use a good dictionary to look up words and find the prepositions that go with them. This strategy can be time-consuming, but it is the only independent solution for your specific needs when writing in English. The rest of this handout explains how to use a good dictionary in this way.

Use all four methods to maximize your knowledge of preposition use.

Using the Dictionary to Choose Prepositions

The first step to using a dictionary to help you choose prepositions is to get a good dictionary. A good one that we have in the Learning Centre is the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Other good choices are the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary and the Collins Cobuild Dictionary. A typical

pocket dictionary is not good enough because it does not include the prepositions attached to adjectives, verbs or nouns.

Each dictionary uses a slightly different system to show preposition usage. In this handout, we will use the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. You will need a copy of that dictionary to complete the handout. Copies are available for use in the Learning Centre.

Here is the Longman entry for the word *reduction*.

re·duc·tion /rɪˈdʌkʃən/n 1 [C,U] the fact of something becoming or being made smaller: [+ **in**] *a slight reduction in the price of oil* | *strategies for noise reduction* | **make a reduction** (=sell something more cheaply) *We can make a reduction if you buy in bulk.* 2 [C] a smaller copy of a photograph, map, or picture — opposite ENLARGEMENT (1)

In this entry, you can see that there are two meanings for the noun *reduction* but only one of them takes a preposition – meaning number 1. In meaning number 1, the dictionary gives you a definition – “the fact of something becoming or being made smaller”. Then in square brackets, it gives information about preposition use in bold – [**+in**]. This tells you to use the word *reduction* with the preposition *in*. After that, the entry gives an example in italics of the word used with its preposition – “*a slight reduction in the price of oil*”. Now, write a sentence using the word *reduction*.

Now look in the Longman Dictionary to try some more examples. Discuss these with your tutor.

1. What preposition is used with the word *inconsistent*?

What example of *inconsistent*+preposition is given in the entry?

Make up another example using *inconsistent*+preposition.

2. What preposition is used with the word *nomination*?

What example of *nomination*+preposition is given in the entry?

Make up another example using *nomination*+preposition.

3. What preposition is used with the word *relapse*?

What example of *relapse*+preposition is given in the entry?

Make up another example using *relapse*+preposition.

For these words, it is quite easy to find the preposition needed, but some words are more difficult as they have more meanings and different prepositions attached to the different meanings. This makes the job of choosing the correct definition a bit more difficult.

Here is the entry from the Longman dictionary for the word *tip*.

tip¹ /tɪp/ n

1 ▶ **END** ◀ [C] the end of something, especially something pointed: *Use the tip of the brush to paint fine lines.* | *The tip of her nose was red.* —see also **FINGERTIP**

2 ▶ **MONEY** ◀ [C] a small amount of additional

money that you give to someone, such as a **WAITER** or a **TAXI DRIVER**: *Did you leave a tip?* | *a 10% tip*

3 ▶ **ADVICE** ◀ [C] a helpful piece of advice: [+ on] *Steve gave me some useful tips on how to take good pictures.*

4 ▶ **WASTE** ◀ [C] *BrE* an area where unwanted waste is taken and left; **DUMP**² (1): *a rubbish tip*

5 ▶ **UNTIDY** ◀ [singular] *BrE informal* an extremely dirty or untidy place: *Your room's a real tip! When are you going to clean it?*

6 **on the tip of your tongue** if a word, name etc is on the tip of your tongue, you know it but cannot remember it

7 **the tip of the iceberg** a small sign of a problem that is much larger: *The official statistics are probably only the tip of the iceberg.*

8 ▶ **HORSE RACE** ◀ [C] *informal* special information about which horse will win a race

tip² v tipped, tipping

1 ▶ **FALL** ◀ [I,T] also **tip over/up** to fall or turn over, or make something do this: *Careful you don't tip the milk jug over!* | *If you lean on the table, it'll tip up.*

2 ▶ **POUR** ◀ [T] to pour something from one place or container into another: **tip sth out/into/onto** etc *She weighed out the flour and tipped it out into a bowl.* —see picture on page 838

3 ▶ **LEAN** ◀ [I,T] to lean at an angle instead of being level or straight, or to make something do this: *Sit still and don't tip the chair back.*

4 ▶ **MONEY** ◀ [I,T] to give an additional amount of money to someone such as a **WAITER** or **TAXI DRIVER**: *Did you remember to tip the waiter?*

5 ▶ **LIKELY TO SUCCEED** ◀ [T usually passive] especially *BrE* to say who you think is most likely to be successful at something: **tip sb as/for** *She's been tipped for promotion.* | **tip sb/sth to do sth** *a horse that was tipped to win*

6 ▶ **COVER** ◀ **be tipped with** to have one end covered in something: *arrows tipped with poison*

7 **it's tipping down** *BrE spoken* it is raining

8 **tip the balance/scales** to give a slight advantage to someone or something: *Your support tipped the balance in our favour.*

9 **tip the scales** at to weigh a particular amount before a **BOXING** or **WRESTLING** match: *He tips the scales at 180 pounds.*

10 **tip sb the wink** *BrE informal* to give someone secret information

11 **tip your hat to** *AmE* to show that you think someone is very good, helpful, successful etc

tip sb ↔ off *phr v* [T] to give someone a secret warning or piece of information, especially to the police about illegal activities: *The police must have been tipped off.*

The first step with a long entry like this is to find the meaning for *tip* that you need. As you can see, this entry provides all noun forms of the word before the verb forms of the word. In this exercise, we will focus on the verb forms of tip, so look for the verb forms which start halfway down at **tip**² v. In this section, eleven meanings for the verb *tip* are listed. Basic meanings are listed between triangles in capital letters for numbers 1 to 6. Other specialized uses of the verb are included in numbers 7 to 11.

Look, now, at meaning #2, **POUR**. The format of this section is quite typical.

- ◆ First, the meaning is given in bold between triangles.
- ◆ Next, a definition is given – “to pour something from one place or container to another”.
- ◆ Next, in bold letters, the general pattern of use of the word and its prepositions are given in bold letters – **tip sth out/into/onto** etc
- ◆ Then an example of the word used with the preposition is given – *She weighed out the flour and tipped it out into a bowl.*

As you can see, if you want to use the word *tip* to mean pour, the dictionary tells you how to use it. It gives you both a general pattern in bold letters and a specific example in italics.

The bold lettered general patterns use some abbreviations:

sth = something

sb = somebody

etc = and others

Let's try some more examples. Discuss these with your tutor.

1. In the dictionary entry for *tip*, find it used as a verb meaning *covered*.

What preposition should be used?

What example sentence is given?

Make up another sentence using *tip* to mean *cover*.

2. In the dictionary entry for *tip*, find it used as a verb meaning *fall*.

What preposition should be used?

What example sentence is given?

Make up another sentence using *tip* to mean *fall*.

Sometimes the preposition uses are not so clearly marked. If you look at verb entries for *tip* numbers 7 to 11, you will notice that these do not begin with specific meanings. Let's look at an example. Here is entry #9.

9 tip the scales at to weigh a particular amount before a BOXING or WRESTLING match: *He tips the scales at 180 pounds.*

As you can see, this type of entry begins with the general pattern in bold – in this case, **tip the scales at**. After that, the meaning of the pattern is defined – “to weigh a particular amount before a BOXING or WRESTLING match”. Then an example sentence is given in italics – *He tips the scales at 180 pounds*.

This entry shows you that if you want to say how much someone weighs, you can use this expression. It is not as easy to find as the entries 1 to 6 because the meaning is not bold at the beginning, but it is possible to find it, you just have to look harder.

Now, try the following meaning of *tip* using the complete entry on page 3 of this handout. Discuss your answers with your tutor.

What preposition do you use with *tip* to mean *give a warning*?

What example sentence is given for this meaning?

Make up another example sentence using *tip* to mean *give a warning*.

You can see that with these examples, it is still possible to find the preposition; it's just a little harder to find it.

Now, use the Longman Dictionary to do the following exercises. Think carefully about the meaning that is needed in each sentence.

Exercise 1: Using the Dictionary to Find the Correct Preposition - turn

- 1) Look up the word *turn* in the dictionary.
 - 2) Find the meaning that best fits each sentence. If you have difficulty finding it, keep looking; read the examples and explanations to find a meaning that fits.
 - 3) Identify the preposition needed and write it in the blank.
1. At the beginning of the class, the instructor turned _____ the overhead projector.
 2. I lost my keys, but they turned _____ 3 weeks later in the lost and found.

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3. He asked her to marry him, but she turned him _____. She said she was too young for marriage.
4. My wonderful holiday turned _____ a nightmare when I lost my wallet.
5. She was on her way to school, but she turned _____ when she realized that it was Sunday, so there was no school.
6. You need to turn _____ all your library books before the college will send you your grades.
7. You are supposed to turn the pants _____ _____ before you put them in the washing machine.
8. Please turn _____ the heat. It's cold in here.

Limitations of the Dictionary Approach

Using the dictionary approach has several limitations:

- ◆ The approach can be time-consuming, especially at first. Many words have shorter entries, so they are quick, but some words, like *tip* have many definitions to look through. As you get more practice, you'll find the prepositions you need more quickly.
- ◆ It can be hard to find the meaning you need. Look broadly; look at entries before and after the one you think you need. Sometimes phrasal verbs (verb + preposition) are listed after the main entry.
- ◆ The approach doesn't work 100% of the time. However, it will help you find most prepositions you need.
- ◆ Sometimes the dictionary gives a choice of prepositions. It doesn't help you decide which one of the choices to use in your sentence. The example sentence can often help you with this. Also, if you use one of the choices given, you have a good chance of being right.

When you get stuck or it seems finding the meaning in a long dictionary entry takes too long, the best solution is to ask a native English speaker.

Exercise 2: Using the Dictionary to Find the Correct Preposition

1. Read the sentence and circle the word you should look up in the dictionary.
2. Look up the word in the dictionary.
3. Find the meaning that best fits the sentence.
4. Identify the preposition needed and write it in the blank.

1. She is going to sleep _____ at her friend's house because she doesn't want to go home in the dark alone.
2. He stayed up so late last night that he is sleeping _____ this morning.
3. The students were excited _____ going on the field trip.
4. Where can I exchange my old textbooks _____ the textbooks I need this term?
5. We exclaimed _____ her new haircut.
6. The students tried to see how many people they could squash _____ the sports car.
7. After the accident, he realized his t-shirt was stained _____ blood.
8. On New Year's Day, many people swear _____ smoking.
9. She swears _____ her Joy of Cooking. She says it's the best cookbook ever.

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10. Every time I take a sip of my drink, he comes by and tops it _____.
11. She topped the apple pie _____ ice cream.
12. They topped _____ their holiday with a fancy dinner out on the last night.

Exercise 3: Using the Dictionary to Find the Correct Preposition

1. Read the sentence and circle the word you should look up in the dictionary.
 2. Look up the word in the dictionary.
 3. Find the meaning that best fits the sentence.
 4. Identify the preposition needed and write it in the blank.
1. Cathy was very angry _____ her brother because he lost her favorite book.
 2. Cathy was angry _____ the loss of the book.
 3. The air is polluted _____ factory emissions.
 4. He got there early to set _____ the display.
 5. They packed their bags and set _____ _____ the airport.
 6. The student pressed the instructor _____ a higher grade on the paper.
 7. The student will take that book _____ of the library.
 8. Tina has taken _____ sewing. Even though she is a beginner, she is already making great outfits.
 9. He took _____ a lot of notes because the lecture was an important one.
 10. I mulled _____ what to get him for his birthday. I wanted to get him something especially nice.

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11. She agrees _____ me. We both have the same idea.
12. After a lot of argument, he finally agreed _____ the plan.

Proofreading for Prepositions

Prepositions are an issue that should not concern you while you are writing a paragraph or essay. Instead, you should leave concerns about prepositions until the editing or proofreading stage of writing. After you have completed a draft, you need to go back and check your writing for problems with prepositions.

This is a process you can use to check prepositions:

1. Circle all nouns, verbs and adjectives which are followed by prepositions or which you think need a preposition.
2. If you are in doubt about the preposition choice, look up the circled word in the Longman Dictionary. Check which preposition is correct for the meaning you want.
3. Cross out preposition mistakes and write in the corrections.

Exercise 5: Proofreading for Prepositions – Sentences

Proofread for prepositions in the following sentences. Use the proofreading steps described above. Some sentences are correct.

Example:

Before deciding to buy the car, the man talked it in with his wife.

1. The student filled up the registration form.
2. When the girl begged her mother for a new dress, the mother gave in and bought it to her.
3. I broke the chocolate bar to half and gave it to my two friends.

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4. She likes to work up at the gym.
5. The peaches were very picked out. All the good ones were gone.
6. When she was doing the laundry, she folded out the clothes and put them away in the drawers.
7. He focused at the key words in the lecture.
8. She went to court on Tuesday. She was condemned into a thief.
9. The length of her sentence is conditional on her behaviour in jail.
10. Her brother tempted her for stealing cookies from the cupboard.

Exercise 6: Proofreading for Prepositions – Letter

Proofread the prepositions in the following letter. Use these proofreading steps:

1. Circle all the nouns, verbs or adjectives which are followed by prepositions or which you think need a preposition.
2. If you are in doubt about the preposition choice, look up the circled word in the Longman Dictionary. Check which preposition is correct for the meaning you want.
3. Cross out preposition mistakes and write in the corrections.

Dear Sandra:

Thanks so much about your letter. Your new school sounds awesome. It was great to hear that you like it so much.

Things are carrying out here as usual. I took up 4 classes again this term, and it's a lot of work. I'm having trouble keeping on with the reading for my History class, but it's really interesting. We're doing projects on the Second World War. In my paper, I'm looking over the causes of the war. It's amazing how

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complicated it all is. I also have to do an oral presentation and I'm kind of worried from that. I get so nervous.

My best news is that I've made a new friend. She comes from Thailand and she's only been studying at Douglas College since last September. Last night, we checked up a new Thai restaurant on Broadway. She introduced me with a lot of great dishes. My favorite was a pineapple, chicken and rice dish. I ate so much I felt sick, but I got over it after a few hours. We stayed so late that the waiter had to kick us up at closing time.

By the way, I ran into Robert the other day. He's working in a waiter, but he's trying to hunt out another job as soon as possible because he hates always having to work nights.

I've got to go. Take care,

Vicky

Exercise 7: Proofreading your own Writing for Problems with Prepositions

Write a letter to a friend. Tell about your experiences at college. While writing the letter, don't worry about prepositions. Concentrate on writing an interesting letter. When you have finished writing a draft of the letter, follow the proofreading steps for prepositions.

Recommended Dictionaries:

Collins Cobuild English Dictionary. (1995). London: Harper Collins Publishers.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. (3rd ed.) (1995). Harlow Essex: Longman.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. (4th ed.). (1989). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

For more work on prepositions:

Azar, B. (2000). Understanding and Using English Grammar: (3rd ed.) Workbook. White Plains, NY: Longman. p. A20-A29.

Beaumont, D . and Granger, C. (1992). The Heinemann English Grammar. Oxford: Heinemann. p. 252-284.

Learning Centre Handout: Gerunds and Infinitives – *Using Verbals*

Murphy, R. (1989). Grammar in Use. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 218-251.