

Prepositions

Prepositions are connecting words. A preposition connects a noun or pronoun to another word in a sentence.

Ex: Robins nest in trees. The noun or pronoun that is connected (trees) is the **object of the preposition**. A **prepositional phrase** includes the preposition, the object of the preposition, and any modifiers. Recognizing prepositional phrases can help one identify the subject and verb of a sentence.

Why is this important? How can knowing prepositions help in writing?

- Writers sometimes mistake the object of the preposition for the subject of the sentence and then use the wrong verb. Look at these two sentences and identify which one has the correct verb:

In Freshman English, each of the students write a research paper.

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To determine the correct verb form, the **writer must know what the subject of the sentence is**. Some writers incorrectly identify the subject of the sentence to be the plural noun “students” and so use the plural verb “write.” However, “students” is actually the object of the preposition “of” and not the subject, which is the singular pronoun “each.” Therefore, the second sentence in the example is the correct one because the singular verb “writes” agrees with the singular subject “each.”

- The words “every” and “everyone” are singular words and require singular verbs. Look at this example:
Every one of you is getting an A on the homework assignment. (Correct)
Every one of you are getting an A on the homework assignment. (Incorrect)

We would ordinarily say “you are” rather than “you is”; however, “you” is not the subject of the sentence—it is the object of the preposition “of.” So, the verb “is getting” is the correct form of the verb to agree with the singular subject of the sentence, which is the word “one” in the example.

- Knowing what the prepositions are can also help a writer determine which words to capitalize in titles of works. Prepositions are not capitalized if they fall in the middle of a title. Do capitalize them if they are the first or last word in a title or whenever they fall after a colon or semicolon.

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

“A Rose for Emily”

“The Truth about Global Warming”

Special Note: MLA rules for the capitalization of words in titles are different from the rules for some other styles such as APA.

- Knowing prepositions can also help a writer know where to place certain commas in sentences. If a sentence begins with a prepositional phrase, place a comma at the end of the phrase:

In 1492, Columbus discovered America.

During the fall semester, students will be learning a lot about writing.

So, how can knowing prepositions help one become a better writer?

- Correct verb
- Capitalization in titles
- Placing Commas

Infinitives vs. Prepositions

Infinitives are sometimes confused with prepositions. An infinitive is a verb form that looks like, but is not, a prepositional phrase. It is also not the verb of the sentence. An infinitive is the word “to” plus a verb:

to dance
to sing
to make

The word “to” can be used in a sentence as either a preposition or as an infinitive:

I want to dance gracefully. (Infinitive — “dance” is a verb)
He went to class. (Preposition — “class” is a noun)

Here is a simple (maybe silly) way to remember the prepositions: **“A preposition is something a rabbit can do to a log.”**

A rabbit can jump over a log.
A rabbit can dig under a log.
A rabbit can hop around a log.
A rabbit can crawl through a hollow log.
A rabbit can sit beside a log.
A rabbit can hide behind a log.
A rabbit can sleep near a log.

Not all of the prepositions work in this way, but many do. Prepositions can also refer to time relationships. For example: from two o’clock to four o’clock.

Some Common Prepositions

aboard	at	concerning	near	to
about	before	despite	of	toward
above	behind	during	off	under
according to	below	except	on	underneath
across	beneath	for	onto	until
after	beside	from	out	up
against	besides	in	outside	upon
along	between	inside	over	with
among	beyond	into	through	within
around	by	like	throughout	without

Other prepositions are on pages 381-82 of *A Writer’s Reference*.

Sources:

Hacker, Diana & Nancy Sommers. *A Writer’s Reference with Writing about Literature*. 8th ed., Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2015.

Long, Elizabeth Cloninger. *College Writing Resources with Readings*. Pearson Longman, 2007.