

Prepositions

Prepositions are words that show the relationship between a noun or a pronoun and another word or element in the clause. Example: Robins nest in tall trees. The preposition “in” shows the relationship between the noun “trees” and the subject-verb clause “[r]obins nest”; therefore, “trees” is the **object of the preposition** “in.” A **prepositional phrase** includes the preposition itself, the object of the preposition, and any modifiers (e.g., “tall”).

How can knowing prepositions help in writing effectively?

Recognizing prepositional phrases can help you identify the subject and the verb of a sentence.

- Writers sometimes mistake the object of the preposition for the subject of the sentence and then use the wrong verb tense.

Subject Prep. Phrase Verb
In Freshman English, each of the students write a research paper. (Incorrect)

Subject Prep. Phrase Verb
In Freshman English, each of the students writes a research paper. (Correct)

To determine the correct verb form, you must identify the subject of the sentence. Some writers incorrectly assume 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 subject “one” is a singular noun and requires a singular verb. Look at this example:

Subject Prep. Phrase Verb
Every one of you is getting an A on the homework assignment. (Correct)

Subject Prep. Phrase Verb
Every one of you are getting an A on the homework assignment. (Incorrect)

“You” is not the subject of the sentence—it is the object of the preposition “of.” Thus, the verb phrase “is getting” is the correct form of the verb to agree with the singular subject of the sentence.

- Understanding prepositions can also help you 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”

The New Pocket Anthology of American Verse: From Colonial Days to the Present

Special Note: MLA rules for the capitalization of words in titles are different from the rules for 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.

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 but usually follows it. An infinitive is the word “to” followed by the base form of a verb:

to dance	to sing	to make
to ponder	to stroll	to explain

- The word “to” can be used in a sentence as either a preposition or as an infinitive; in each case, “to” plays a different role:
I want to dance gracefully. (Infinitive — “to” marks the verb “dance”)
He went to class. (Preposition — “to class” functions as an adverb modifying “went”)

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

A rabbit can jump <u>over</u> a log.	A rabbit can sit <u>beside</u> a log.
A rabbit can dig <u>under</u> a log.	A rabbit can hide <u>behind</u> a log.
A rabbit can hop <u>around</u> a log.	A rabbit can sleep <u>near</u> a log.
A rabbit can crawl <u>through</u> a hollow log.	A rabbit can perch <u>on</u> 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

For additional information and examples, see also:

- A Writer’s Reference*, pp. 248-51; pp. 317-19.
- The Blinn College – Bryan Writing Center’s “Infinitives and Gerunds” handout.
- Long, Elizabeth Clonger. *College Writing Resources with Readings*. Pearson Longman, 2007.