



DOUGLAS COLLEGE

Learning Centre

Using a Dictionary for Help with IDIOMATIC PREPOSITIONS

Using prepositions correctly in English can be very difficult for English language learners. Prepositions used to show time (e.g. “on Monday”) or to show place (e.g. “on the table”) are not difficult to learn, but many preposition that follow nouns, verbs, and adjectives (e.g. “to tell on”) are unpredictable, making their use highly idiomatic. In other words, you cannot simply learn rules or find logical reasons for how to use many prepositions. People who speak English as their mother tongue gradually learn the thousands of word/preposition combinations as part of their culture.

Four ways to improve your use of word/preposition combinations are listed below. You will need to combine all four of these methods to significantly improve in this area.

- ◆ Regularly read and listen to English. Notice the prepositions used. Practice using these prepositions in the ways you notice they are used. This method is slow, but it works well over the long term. Unfortunately, when you are faced with a specific preposition problem, this method doesn’t give you any short term way to solve the problem.
- ◆ As you learn vocabulary, take the extra step of also memorizing the prepositions that go with common verbs, adjectives and nouns. Exercises such as those listed in the “For more work on prepositions” section at the end of this handout are useful in this way. This is a good strategy for memorizing commonly used expressions. However, there are too many word/preposition combinations in English to memorize all of them, so you also need other strategies.
- ◆ When you are not sure about a word/preposition combination, ask a native English speaker.
- ◆ The most effective strategy for improving preposition use in your writing is to learn how to use a good learner’s dictionary to look up words and find the prepositions that go with them. When you cannot ask a native English speaker, this is the only independent solution for improving your preposition

usage. The rest of this handout explains how to use a good learner's dictionary in this way.

Using the Dictionary to Choose Prepositions

The first step for using a dictionary for preposition help is to find the right kind of dictionary. Most standard English dictionaries do not include the prepositions attached to adjectives, verbs or nouns so, although they provide other kinds of useful help, they are of no use with prepositions because they do not show how words are used in combination with each other in English. Most dictionaries written specifically for ESL students provide preposition help. A good ESL dictionary is the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Other good choices are the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary and the Collins Cobuild Dictionary.

Each dictionary uses a slightly different system to show preposition usage. In this handout, we will use the free online version of the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. You can find this online dictionary at:

www.ldoceonline.com

To do the exercises below, you will need to work at a computer with an internet connection, or use one of the ESL dictionaries listed above. Hard copies of these dictionaries are available for use in the Learning Centre and in the Library.

Dictionary Task

In the dictionary you are using (online or hard copy), look up the word "*reduction*."

In this entry, you will likely see that the noun "*reduction*" can be used with several different prepositions (*in, of, on*). How do these prepositions change the way the word "*reduction*" is used in each example sentence? Can you tell any differences in context or meaning?

Now 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. How many different prepositions are used with the word "*nomination*"?

What is the difference in usage between “*nomination for*” and “*nomination as*”?

Make up another example using *nomination*+preposition.

3. Look up the word *relapse*. You will notice that “*relapse*” can be used both as a noun and as a verb.

When is “*relapse*” used with no preposition?

When does “*relapse*” require a preposition?

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

Make up another example using *relapse*+preposition.

For these first few words, the preposition can be found easily, but some words are more difficult as they have many meanings and different prepositions attached to the different meanings. This makes the job of choosing the correct definition a bit more difficult.

For a more complicated preposition choice, look up the word “*tip*”.

Part of Speech matters:

The first step with more complicated choices is to make sure which “part of speech” you are using. As with the word “*relapse*” in #3 above, it’s important to notice when a word is being used as a verb, noun, or adjective because each uses prepositions differently. In the same way, with the word “*tip*,” you must decide whether you need the verb form or the noun form? Look up how prepositions are used with the noun form, and then look up how they are used differently with the verb form.

Once you are clear about the function of the word in a sentence, find the specific meaning for “*tip*” that you need. As you can see, the noun forms are listed separately from the verb forms of the word. In this exercise, we will focus on the verb forms of *tip*, so look for the meanings of “*tip*” used as a verb. In this section, eleven meanings for the verb “*tip*” are listed, plus several separate idioms, such as “*on the tip of my tongue*”.

Look at the second meaning, which is POUR. The format of this section is quite typical.

- ◆ First, a definition is given – “*to pour something from one place or container into another.*”
 - ◆ Next, you see the general pattern of use of the word and its prepositions – **tip something out/into/onto**
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- ◆ Then an example of the word used with the preposition is given – “*Ben tipped the contents of the drawer onto the table.*”

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

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*.

3. Find the use of the verb *tip* to mean *give a warning*.

What preposition do you use with *tip*?

What example sentence is given for this meaning?

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

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. 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.
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. Using an online dictionary is faster since you don't need to look up each word. 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, ask a native English speaker.

Exercise 2: Using the Dictionary to Find the Correct Preposition

Instructions: Read the sentence and circle the word you should look up in the dictionary. Then, look up the word in the dictionary. Find the word form and the meaning that best fits the sentence. Finally, 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.
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. The topped _____ their holiday with a fancy dinner out on the last night.

Exercise 3: Using the Dictionary to Find the Correct Preposition

Read the sentence and circle the word you should look up in the dictionary. Then, look up the word in the dictionary. Find the word form and the meaning that best fits the sentence. Finally, 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.
11. She agrees _____ me. We both have the same idea.
12. After a lot of argument, he finally agreed _____ the plan.

Proofreading for Prepositions

Do not worry about prepositions as you write a first draft. Worrying too much about prepositions can interrupt your writing process. 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 you think might have preposition problems.
2. Look up the circled word. Check which preposition is correct for the meaning you want.
3. Cross out preposition mistakes and write in the corrections.

Exercise 4: 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.
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 5: 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 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 6: 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.

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DICTIONARY HELP FOR PREPOSITIONS – ANSWER KEY

Exercise 1: Using the Dictionary to Find the Correct Preposition – *turn*

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

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1. She is going to sleep over at her friend's house because she doesn't want to go home in the dark alone.
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11. She agrees with me. We both have the same idea.
12. After a lot of argument, he finally agreed to the plan.

Exercise 4: Proofreading for Prepositions – Sentences

1. The student filled ~~up~~ OUT the registration form.
2. When the girl begged her mother for a new dress, the mother gave in and bought it ~~to~~ FOR her.
3. I broke the chocolate bar ~~to~~ IN half and gave it to my two friends.
4. She likes to work ~~up~~ OUT at the gym.
5. The peaches were very picked ~~out~~ OVER. All the good ones were gone.
6. When she was doing the laundry, she folded ~~out~~ UP the clothes and put them away in the drawers.
7. He focused ~~at~~ ON the key words in the lecture.
8. She went to court on Tuesday. She was condemned ~~into~~ AS a thief.
9. The length of her sentence is conditional on her behaviour in jail.
10. Her brother tempted her ~~for~~ INTO stealing cookies from the cupboard.

Exercise 5: Proofreading for Prepositions – Letter

Dear Sandra:

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

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

I've got to go. Take care,

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