

Prepositions and Prepositional Phrases

Prepositional phrases are phrases that modify nouns and verbs, and prepositional phrases add more information to those nouns or verbs. Prepositions often show relationships of time and space between two nouns. In the following sentence, the preposition “on” tells the reader where the handout is located: “This handout can be found *on* the SJSU Writing Center website.” Prepositional phrases function in two ways within a sentence: as adjectives and as adverbs. Rarely, they can also function as nouns.

Parts of a Prepositional Phrase

Prepositional phrases are made up of a preposition and an object of the preposition. The preposition begins the phrase, and the object of the preposition (a noun or a word or phrase acting as a noun) comes right after the preposition. In the example from the first paragraph, “on” is the preposition, and “the SJSU Writing Center website” is the object of the preposition.

Prepositions

The hardest aspect of prepositional phrases is the prepositions themselves. A comprehensive list of prepositions is too lengthy to include in this handout, but the prepositions in the following table are among the most common.

Above	Across	Against	Along	Among	Around	At
Before	Behind	Below	Beneath	Beside	Between	By
Down	From	In	Into	Near	Of	Off
On	To	Toward	Under	Upon	With	Within

Prepositions most commonly relate to time, location, space, and direction. Prepositions also connect the prepositional phrase to the rest of the sentence; they signal that a modification is coming and that the reader is about to get additional information.

Note that prepositions take on different roles depending on their context. The preposition “at” can be used to indicate location when used in the sentence, “The man was *at* the house,” but it is used to indicate direction in the sentence, “The dog barked *at* the car.”

Finding and using prepositional phrases might seem easy. All you need to do is find the preposition. However, this task is made complicated by the fact that prepositions follow no pattern. This means that you need to memorize them—there is no cheat sheet or quick trick to identify prepositions. But don’t fret! You only need to be able to identify the most common ones to learn how they are used. Another test is to see if you can remove what you suspect is the

prepositional phrase—oftentimes, prepositional phrases can be removed without changing the meaning of the sentence.

Functions of Prepositional Phrases

Prepositional phrases add meaning to a sentence, functioning adverbially or adjectively. Sometimes, they function nominally (as a noun).

Adjectival

Adjectival prepositional phrases modify nouns (and pronouns) and function as adjectives. (The clue is in the name.) Adjectival prepositional phrases answer the questions of what kind, how much, or how many.

Examples:

- The shape of the pencil was pleasing.
- I brought the pizza slice to the girl from my English class.

Adverbial

Adverbial prepositional phrases modify verbs and function as adverbs. Just like adverbs, adverbial prepositional phrases deal with time, place, and manner. They answer the questions how, why, when, or where.

Examples:

- The cat jumped into the running dishwasher.
- The woman placed the penny on the railroad tracks to derail the train.

In the first example, “*into the running dishwasher*” is the prepositional phrase. It modifies “jumped,” and it answers the question, “where?”

In the second example, “*on the railroad tracks*” modifies “the penny,” and it answers the question, “where?” This example is a tricky one, because—as you may have noticed—it seems as if there might be another prepositional phrase present: “to derail the train.” The word “to” is a common preposition. However, “to” also precedes the base form of a verb (referred to as the infinitive verb). You have to look at what follows the word “to” before you can determine if it's a preposition or the infinitive verb marker; in this case, “derail” is a verb, so “to” is forming the infinitive verb. (And please don't try to derail a train with a penny. It won't work anyway.)

Nominal

Prepositional phrases can also rarely function as nouns. These phrases usually appear at the beginning of the sentence and stand in for the subject.

Examples:

- At the bus stop in the rain is a terrible place to be.
- Near the sign is where I am.

In these examples, “*at the bus stop in the rain*” and “*near the sign*” are nominal prepositional phrases: they function as subjects. Notice the awkward sentence structure in these two examples—awkwardness is the main reason why nominal prepositional phrases are so rare.

Note of Caution

Some words can function as multiple parts of speech, and multiple prepositions fall into this category. The word “for” is one such word; it can function as a preposition and as a coordination conjunction. (See our handout on [coordinating conjunctions](#) for more details.) The word “to” is another word pulling double duty, as mentioned earlier: it functions as a preposition and as an infinitive verb marker. (Infinitive verbs are unconjugated verbs that are directly preceded by “to.” See our handout on [infinitives](#) for more details.)

Activity 1: Identify Prepositional Phrases

Look at the first paragraph of this handout. Your task is to find all the prepositional phrases and list them below.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Answer Key for Activity 1

1. to those nouns or verbs
2. of time and space
3. between two nouns
4. in the following sentence
5. on the SJSU Writing Center website
6. in two ways
7. within a sentence

Activity 2: Create Your Own Prepositional Phrases

Here are some sentence frames to which you can add prepositional phrases. Use the given prepositions to create your prepositional phrases. Identify if your newly created prepositional phrases are functioning adverbially or adjectively. (Maybe even try nominally if you feel like it!) Mix and match to your heart's content. Not all prepositions from the list need to be used, and some may be used more than once. It's up to you!

Prepositions:

- At
- To
- Before
- Near
- Under
- Of

Model/Example:

Sentence Frame:

My dog saw the bone . . .

Sample Response:

My dog saw the bone *under* the cupboard.

(Functioning adverbially since it's explaining where the bone is located.)

1. The professor went . . .
2. I came home . . .
3. I went to sleep . . .
4. . . . is a great place to go . . .
5. The sound . . .

Answer Key for Activity 2

Answers for this activity will vary.