

# WHAT ARE PREPOSITIONS?

Prepositions are abstract words that have no concrete meaning. They merely show the relationships between groups of words. A good way to test if a word is a preposition is to position it in front of phrases like "the box" or "the sides of the box" and see if the phrase makes sense. For prepositions concerning time, try positioning the preposition in front of a phrase like "the movie." (This rule works for about nine out of ten prepositions). Here are some examples:

<b><i>across the box</i></b>	<b><i>around the box</i></b>	<b><i>on top of the box</i></b>
<b><i>under the box</i></b>	<b><i>near the box</i></b>	<b><i>along the sides of the box</i></b>

Such a phrase that begins with a preposition is called a **prepositional phrase**. The noun that comes after a preposition or concludes the prepositional phrase is called the **object of a preposition**. Here is a list of the most common prepositions.

<b>aboard</b>	<b>below</b>	<b>from</b>	<b>outside</b>	<b>up</b>
<b>above</b>	<b>beneath</b>	<b>in</b>	<b>over</b>	<b>upon</b>
<b>across</b>	<b>beside(s)</b>	<b>inside (of)</b>	<b>past**</b>	<b>with</b>
<b>after</b>	<b>between</b>	<b>into</b>	<b>since***</b>	<b>within</b>
<b>against</b>	<b>beyond</b>	<b>like</b>	<b>through</b>	<b>without</b>
<b>along</b>	<b>but*</b>	<b>near</b>	<b>til</b>	
<b>among</b>	<b>by</b>	<b>of</b>	<b>to</b>	
<b>around</b>	<b>down</b>	<b>off (of)</b>	<b>toward(s)</b>	
<b>at</b>	<b>during</b>	<b>off</b>	<b>under</b>	
<b>before</b>	<b>except</b>	<b>on (top of)</b>	<b>underneath</b>	
<b>behind</b>	<b>for</b>	<b>out (of)</b>	<b>until</b>	

\**But* can also function as a pure conjunction.

\*\**Past* can also function as a noun or an adjective.

\*\*\**Since* can also function as a subordinate conjunction

## SHOULD I END A SENTENCE WITH A PREPOSITION?

The so-called "rule" about never ending a sentence with a preposition comes from Latin grammar. In Latin, the word order of a sentence didn't matter; subjects and verbs and direct objects could appear in any sequence. However, the placement of prepositions was important. Latin sentences could quickly become confusing if the preposition does not appear immediately before the object of the preposition, so it became a stylistic rule for Latin writers to have objects always and immediately following prepositions. That meant a sentence would never end with a preposition.

When English grammarians in the 1500s and 1600s starting writing grammar books, they frequently applied Latin rules to English, even though those rules had never been applicable before. They wanted to make English more like Latin, which had a reputation for being logical and eloquent while English was still trying to gain acceptance as a scholarly language. One grammarian even applied mathematical rules to English, such as the idea of a "double negative" becoming a "positive," which certainly made sense in algebra, in a "(-2) x (-2) = +4" kind of a way, but this idea was completely new-fangled in English. English for centuries had been merrily using double negatives and ending sentences with prepositions before that time without anyone complaining, yet now it is grammatical law!

In the daily speech of British folk, the most common dialects still conform to this rule. The British tend to say, "To what place was the package sent?" or "For what purpose is that machine made?" On the other hand, in many U.S. dialects, it is a common Americanism to say, "What place was the package sent to?" or "What is that machine for?" These phrasings sound acceptable (but a little low class) to most Americans, and it is probably permissible to go ahead and end the sentence with a preposition in informal writing. In more formal writing, or when writing for a British audience, it might be wise to go ahead and follow the rule (even if it is artificial). The most important tip is to avoid sentences that sound awkward or confuse the reader. An editor supposedly chastised one writer, variously said to be Mark Twain or Winston Churchill, for ending a sentence with a preposition. The author retorted, "Ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put." His retort neatly illustrates the point that slavishly following grammatical rules can be just as devastating to good taste as breaking the rules for the sake of clarity and style. Always make the choice that avoids the awkward sentence.