

Prepositions

Prepositions are small words commonly used together with **nouns** (naming words) to connect words in a sentence. Often they are used to make a **prepositional phrase**, for example: **in** the middle; **down** the back; **up** the river; **to** the university; **by** my side; **under** the car; **between** the slices of bread; and so on.

They are an essential part **of** academic writing (there's another one!). However there are no clear rules for usage and patterns must be learned. This is because English has so many borrowings from other languages. Sometimes preposition usage seems illogical, e.g., why do we say "put my shoes on", and not "put my feet in my shoes"? There is no reason for this. It is merely the pattern of acceptable English usage.

The main prepositions used in academic writing are as follows:

- **about** around something or enclosing something
- **on** the basis for something
- **against** opposed/next to something
- **for** with a purpose or giving a reason
- **at** connected to a location
- **from** the origin/distance of something
- **by** next/as a result of something
- **in** completely or partly enclosed by something/the focus of a criticism
- **of** belonging to something or someone; contained in something
- **to** in a direction/application of something
- **with/along with** connected to something and near something; using something
- **between** located in the middle of things.

In context

Here are some examples of prepositions in the context of academic writing. As a way to practise using prepositions, look for examples in journal articles in your discipline.

About: around something or enclosing something

- Jones (1999) criticises Harrison's (1990) thesis **about** the digital economy. He suggests that Harrison's point **about** the digital economy is overstated.

On: on the basis for something

- Jones (1999) notes that Harrison's (1990) thesis **on** distributivism is flawed.

Note the difference from "about" in the previous example: the digital economy is "around us" in a sense, but distributivism is more abstract and is the theoretical basis for something, so we use "on".

Against: opposed or next to something

- Jones (1999) uses his arguments **against** Harrison (1990) ... However, there are several arguments that can be made **against** it. ... The machine was placed **against** the apparatus and turned on.

For: with a purpose or giving a reason

- Jones (1999) uses his arguments **for** his literature review ... **for** advancing a new thesis. ... Three arguments **for** Harrison's theory can be made. ... Using the acidic solution is helpful **for** the next step.

From/By: the origin/distance of something/as a result of something (often used together)

- Jones (1999) developed his new theory **from** an idea outlined **by** Harrison (1990) and **by** extending it in a new direction. ... The point made **by** Harrison (1990) was critiqued **for** its lack of coherence. Jones' point is distinct **from** Harrison's in a number of ways. **By** contrast, Jones (1999) claims that/Jones, **by** contrast, claims that ... *

At: connected to a location

- *At the conclusion of this seminar we can go home ... The beaker was held **at** a 2cm distance from the flame... Jones (1999) raised his objections **at** a meeting. ... Proceedings of the conference are available **at** <http://www...>*

In: completely or partly enclosed by something/focus of a criticism

- *The problems outlined **in** Jones's critique of Harrison (1990) have been adequately discussed. ... **In** contrast to this, the following objection can be raised. ... There is a contradiction **in** the claims made by Jones. This should be seen **in** context. ... **In** contrast to Harrison (1990), Jones (1999) argues ... **

Note the difference between the use of "By contrast" and "In contrast". While both are used to compare differences, the former is followed by [to/with] + [noun], the latter is followed or preceded by [noun]. (Source: <https://languagetips.wordpress.com/category/in-or-by-contrast/>)

Of: belonging to something or someone/contained in something

- ***Of** most note here, are the points raised by Jones (1999) ... The main points **of** Harrison's (1990) theory are as follows: 1) ... 2)... Three arguments capable **of** withstanding scrutiny are the ones ...*

To: in a direction/application of something

- *When applied **to** a different context, it can be seen ... Placing the acidic solution next **to** the beaker ... There is a need amongst theorists in the area **to** provide case studies **to** demonstrate that their ideas work in practice. Jones' (1999) views are close **to** Harrison's (1990).*

With/Along with: connected to something or near something/using something

- *The standard approach should be taught **along with** a practical application. Jones (1999) **along with** Harrison (1990) are the key theorists in the area of X. ... The acidic solution should be used **with** caution.*

Between: located in the middle of things

- *Jones' (1999) contributions are located **between** the seminal work of Harrison (1990) and Berkeley (2000).*

Helpful phrases

While this is not by any means a complete list, following are some prepositional phrases that are especially helpful in academic writing.

- **According to:** *According to* Marx (1844), Religion is 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people'.
- **On account of:** Jones' results should be dismissed *on account of* the low sample size.
- **As a result of/adoption of:** Jamison's view is partly *a result of* her adoption of Porter's five forces theory.
- **In relation to:** Porter's five forces theory can be understood *in relation to* other management theories.
- **As a consequence [of]:** *As a consequence*, Darwin's views were adopted by the scientific community.

Other helpsheets available

- Parallelism
- Articles
- Apostrophes
- Writing in an Academic Style

References

Darling, C. (n.d.). Guide to grammar and writing. Capital Community College. Retrieved October 24, 2017, from http://plato.algonquincollege.com/applications/guideToGrammarUS/?page_id=1622

Miller, J. (n.d.). Prepositions in academic writing. University of Adelaide. Retrieved October 24, 2017, from: <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/english-for-uni/prepositions/>