



# Prepositions

## What you need to know

Learning how to use prepositions correctly can be a problematic area for English language learners. Why is this? One problem is that they seem to appear everywhere. They can appear before nouns (*on Monday*), in front of gerund verbs (*for speaking*), as part of a phrasal verb (*get up*) or after adjectives (*interested in*). This means it is difficult to provide learners with a simple rule explaining when and how to use them. Remember too, that rules can be overgeneralised and telling a learner that *We say 'happy for' someone* to mean *'We are pleased that someone else is happy'* could later lead the learner to incorrect usage and possibly producing a mistake such as *"I think you will be happy for (instead of 'with') this present"*

A good source of information about vocabulary and related prepositions is the [English Vocabulary Profile \(EVP\)](#). The EVP shows, in both British and American English, which words and phrases learners around the world know at levels A1 to C2 of the [Common European Framework of Reference for Languages \(CEFR\)](#). Rather than providing a syllabus of the vocabulary that learners *should* know, the EVP project verifies what they *do* know at each level.

The screenshot shows the English Vocabulary Profile interface. At the top, there's a header with the title 'English Vocabulary Profile' and images of a person and a keyboard. Below this, there are two tabs for 'British English' and 'American English'. The main content area displays the word 'convenient' with its phonetic transcription /kən'vi:..ni.ənt/. To the right of the word is a button for 'Outline view'. Below the word, there's a 'Word family' section listing 'Nouns: convenience', 'Adjectives: convenient, inconvenient', and 'Adverbs: conveniently'. The 'ADJECTIVE' section is expanded, showing 'EASY/SUITABLE' with a B1 level indicator. It includes a definition: 'easy to use or suiting your plans well', dictionary examples, and a learner example: 'If it would be possible for you, I can attend another class at any time which is convenient for you. Preliminary English Test; B1; Farsi'. The 'NEAR' section also shows a B1 level indicator, a definition: 'near or easy to get to', a dictionary example, and a learner example: 'It is near the train station [so] it is very convenient to get there. Preliminary English Test; B1; Korean'. On the left side, there's a sidebar with 'Choose level:' options (A1, A1-A2, A1-B1, A1-B2, A1-C1, A1-C2, A2 only, B1 only, B2 only, C1 only, C2 only), a search bar with 'convenient' entered, and a 'Search' button. At the bottom of the sidebar, there are links for 'English Profile Home', 'About English Vocabulary Profile', 'Word of the Week', 'Help', and 'Feedback'.



### **What does an EVP entry include?**

Each entry uses reliable information from Cambridge dictionaries and consists of:

- a word,
- an audio and written pronunciation,
- grammar and usage information,
- a level indicator (A1-C2) for each meaning or phrase,
- a definition,
- one or more native speaker dictionary examples, often highlighting typical collocations (Note that dictionary examples are not necessarily at the same level as the meaning itself. Where several dictionary examples are given, the simplest are displayed first).

Most EVP entries have:

- authentic examples of learner writing from the Cambridge Learner Corpus,
- guidewords, in capital letters, allowing users to navigate easily through entries of words with more than one meaning.

Some EVP entries also have:

- Word Family panels, grouping words that are formed from the same root.  
In these panels, words at C1 and C2 levels are shown in italics, to illustrate which core family members are known by B2 level and which are additional at C1 and C2 levels.

### **Other possible difficulties**

The correct use of prepositions amongst language learners can also suffer from L1 (first language) interference. In the case of direct translation as a learning strategy, prepositions prove difficult as the meaning of a particular preposition often depends heavily on context. Indeed, when a preposition is used in English in the same context, and in the learner's own language, a preposition may simply not be used.



## Classroom ideas

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So how can we help our learners with prepositions? Here are some practical suggestions for you to try in class:

### 1. **Make a gap fill into a listening exercise**

Keep a record of short sentences containing typical mistakes your learners make with prepositions. Read these sentences out to your class but say 'mmm' instead of the preposition. Ask your learners to listen and discuss in pairs which preposition is missing before writing it down. When you have finished, hand out a copy of the sentences to each pair so they have a chance to check their answers.

### 2. **Practice pronunciation and prepositions**

Dictate questions in chunks that focus on different uses of prepositions such as 'What type of websites/ are you/ interested in?', 'What are you/ happy about/ at the moment?' and 'What piece of technology/ is most important/ in your life?' After each question, ask learners to compare their sentences. Offer help with any problems and draw their attention to pronunciation elements. Finally, learners ask and answer the questions in pairs or small groups. This provides the opportunity for learners to hear connected speech elements as well as to practise with prepositions.

### 3. **Make a meaningful mill drill**

Ask learners to draw some circles in their note book that are big enough to write a few words in. Tell them they are going to write an answer in each that is true for them, in a random order. For example, ask them to write '*something they are good at*' in a circle. Next ask them to write '*something that is good for a rainy day*'. Continue with similar sentences using other words and prepositions. For instance, '*Who is this class open to?*' and '*How long is the school open for?*' When you have finished, ask learners to stand up and mingle with their circles. They then have to identify other learners' answers, for instance '*You are good at playing football*', '*Going to the cinema is good for a rainy day*'. You may find modelling this yourself with a single student first helps the class understand the activity. This is good for recycling language where a verb followed by different prepositions have different meanings, for instance, *good at/ good for, open for/ open to, available to/available at*.



**4. Compare languages through translation**

Keep a record of typical mistakes your learners make involving prepositions in short sentences. Just like the first activity. Write each sentence down on a small piece of paper. Then, give out small pieces of blank paper to your learners who work in pairs. Tell them they are going to translate a sentence but their partner isn't allowed to see it. If the sentence is in English they should translate it into their language and if the sentence is in their language they should translate it into English. Hand one of your typical mistake sentences to a learner in each pair. They translate this into their own language on a blank piece of paper and pass it to their partner. Their partner translates this back into English. Learners then compare and discuss the three sentences. In feedback, ask learners to comment on the activity.

**5. Go mobile with a technology based treasure hunt**

If your learners have got smart phones you can practise prepositions by creating a treasure hunt trail using QR codes. They need to download a QR reader and scanner app first, which is free. QR codes are black and white patterns that a smart phone can read and use to open a webpage. You can then use an online QR Code generator to create a number of these patterns that open online treasure hunt clues that you have written. Copy and paste the generated QR code onto a word document to print, cut out and stick in different places around the classroom or school. Learners use their smart phones to scan the QR codes, read the clues and follow a trail of them. Use sentences such as *'Walk across the room and look behind the teacher's chair'*, or *'Walk out the class and look above the door'*.

**6. Do a relay dictation with learner-generated sentences**

Ask learners to review their written work for mistakes they have made involving prepositions and that have been corrected. Pass round a blank piece of paper for learners to collaboratively make a list of a few of these sentences. Stick the piece of paper on the classroom door and put learners into teams. Each team member then takes it in turn to go to this list, read and remember as much as possible and return to their team and dictate what they remember. The first team to finish writing out the complete list is the winner.



**7. Use an online gap fill generator to create a worksheet for homework**

You can provide the missing prepositions separately in a random order for learners to copy into the right gap or challenge them that little bit more and leave the answers open. In the latter, it is possible for learners to produce different yet correct answers. This in itself provides a nice opportunity to discuss the differences in meaning with the class. If you have the time you can personalise each worksheet so that each learner gets a unique worksheet with prepositional sentences that they have problems with.

**8. Scaffold a speaking activity that recycles language**

Create a Wordle, which is an online generated word cloud, of short prepositional phrases (two or three words). In pairs learners take it in turns to choose one of the Wordle phrases to ask their partner a question. Their partner listens, answers the question and then chooses one to ask back. For example, the Wordle may have *'important to'* and a learner could ask *'what object is the most important to you?'*