

Eschew Obfuscation: Prepositions by Faye Roberts

Prepositions are one of the eight (or nine, depending on whom you ask) parts of speech. While they are often little words like *at*, *by*, *of*, and *up*, their versatility can make a big difference in a sentence. They add details that provide interesting information.

Here's a short, original composition with prepositions in bold. It was written for a grammar class assignment to create a poem using only prepositional phrases.

From my chamber **near** the roof,

Down the stairway, **through** the door.

Outside the house and **toward** the woodland,

Along the path **beneath** the stars.

Despite the rising mists **before** me,

With measured steps **against** the wind,

Under moon and darkening clouds

Onto the silent forest floor.

The poem consists entirely of prepositional phrases, which are always introduced by a preposition and include its object: a noun, pronoun, or gerund (a verb ending in *-ing* and acting as a noun). The phrase may also include one or more modifiers.

Prepositional phrases take this form:

Preposition + optional modifiers + noun(s), pronoun(s) or gerund

Here are some examples from the poem:

- From my chamber (preposition *From* + modifier *my* + noun *chamber*)
- Before me (preposition *Before* + pronoun *me*)
- Onto the silent forest floor (preposition *Onto* + modifiers *the silent forest* + noun *floor*)

In her book, *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wicked Good Prose*, Constance Hale reminds us that the word *preposition* comes from the Latin meaning "to put before." A preposition comes before its object. Together the preposition and its object form a phrase that usually modifies something else in the sentence.



Photo by Kevin Lanceplaine/Unsplash

As modifiers, prepositional phrases tell us about time, location, cause, and the way in which something is done. Prepositions in the poem refer to location (e.g., near, down, outside, toward, beneath, under, onto) and the way something is done (e.g., through, despite, with). A prepositional phrase never actually identifies the subject but describes the subject's relationship with the surrounding world.

As modifiers, prepositional phrases tell us about time, location, cause, and the way in which something is done. Prepositions in the poem refer to location (e.g., *near*, *down*, *outside*, *toward*, *beneath*, *under*, *onto*) and the way something is done (e.g., *through*, *despite*, *with*). A prepositional phrase never actually identifies the subject but describes the subject's relationship with the surrounding world.

When phrases modify a noun or pronoun, they work as adjectives. When they modify verbs, they work as adverbs.

Our long-awaited trip **to the beach** was delayed. (Adjectival: the phrase *to the beach* modifies the noun *trip*.)

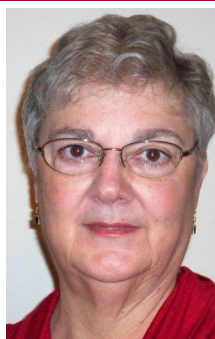
The editor will return my manuscript **by Friday morning**. (Adverbial: the phrase *by Friday morning* modifies the verb *will return*.)

As Bryan Garner warns in *The Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation*, when a

phrase is working as an adjective or adverb, it should be placed as close as possible to the word it modifies. Doing so helps avoid awkward constructions such as "*Is there someone here with a blue pickup truck named Tay?*"

Employ prepositional phrases judiciously. While useful for adding detail, they can be clunky. Rather than saying "The hat **on the man with the beard**," it's cleaner to say "The bearded man's hat." In this case, the prepositional phrases "on the man" and "with the beard" can be replaced with two efficient adjectives: "man's" and "bearded."

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Eschew Obfuscation, continued

A preposition may be simple or compound. Garner explains that simple prepositions consist of a single word of just one syllable; examples include *as*, *at*, *by*, *for*, *like*, *plus*, and *with*. Compound prepositions have two or more syllables and may even contain two or more words: *about*, *across*, *below*, *beneath*, *except*, *onto*, and *without* are a few.

Prepositions containing multiple words are called “phrasal prepositions” and function as a single prepositional unit. Many are familiar from their starring roles in verbose, official-sounding documents:

- apart from
- as distinguished from
- except for
- in accordance with
- in spite of
- insofar as
- with respect to

Idioms often contain prepositions. An idiom may be a peculiar term of grammar or may have a meaning that can’t be figured out from the context. Common English idioms using prepositions include:

- by the skin of your teeth
- off her rocker
- on the wagon
- over his head

To those accustomed to a specific idiom, an unexpected preposition can be jarring. For instance, in some regions those wanting to exchange a twenty-dollar bill for smaller bills may ask for “change **for** a twenty”; elsewhere the request may be for “change **of** a twenty.”

In some cases, changing prepositions can actually signal a change in the meaning of a verb. Note the different nuances when the prepositions are changed in these examples from *The Little, Brown Handbook*:

- charge **for** a purchase; charge **with** a crime
- involved **in** a task; involved **with** a person
- occupied **by** a person; occupied **in** study; occupied **with** a thing
- rewarded **by** the judge; rewarded **for** something done; rewarded **with** a gift
- wait **at** a place; wait **for** a train or a person; wait **on** a customer

Because prepositional phrases lack subjects or predicates, they aren’t complete sentences and don’t need internal punctuation. When they begin a sentence, though, they’re usually followed by a comma—unless they are quite short. When the phrase interrupts a sentence, it is set off with commas.

Resources

Fowler, H. Ramsey and Jane E. Aaron. *The Little, Brown Handbook*, 10th Ed.

Garner, Bryan A. *The Chicago Guide to Grammar, Usage, and Punctuation*.

Grammar Bytes: Grammar Instruction with Attitude. “The Preposition,” <http://www.chompchomp.com/terms/preposition.htm>

Hale, Constance. *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wicked Good Prose*.

Purdue Online Writing Lab. “Prepositions for Time, Place, and Introducing Objects,” https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/prepositions/index.html.

Words into Type, 3rd Ed.

- *In 2001* the World Trade Center was attacked. (No comma needed.)
- *According to police reports and news bulletins*, the subject was apprehended last night. (The introductory prepositional phrase is followed by a comma.)
- The subject, *according to police reports and news bulletins*, was apprehended last night. (The prepositional phrase interrupts the sentence and is set off by commas before and after it.)

We’re often warned to avoid the “terminal preposition”—one that is stranded at the end of a sentence, as in “Where’s my money at?” This taboo has prompted jokes like the following:

Child: *What’s a preposition?*

Parent: *A preposition is a word that you should never end a sentence with.*

As with the misleading advice to never split infinitives, this “rule” came to us from Latin grammar and is ignored just as often. Such constructions are quite common in everyday speech and trying to avoid them can result in stilted language, i.e., *words with which you should never end a sentence*. The venerable *Words into Type* even warns copy editors against creating strained sentences just to avoid a terminal preposition.

While prepositions generally lead off prepositional phrases, they perform other functions too. Sometimes a preposition hooks on to a verb to form a verb phrase. Familiar examples include *boot up*, *log in*, *check out*, and *turn on*. Such phrases are called “particles.”

Are there ways prepositions can spice up your writing? If so, hop to it. Get with it. Go for it.