

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**: *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.

(Adapted from Miller, n.d.)

Here are some example academic contexts in which the prepositions might be used in academic writing. To practice your use of prepositions it is a good idea to 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 (the basis for something):

- *Jones (1999) notes that Harrison's (1990) thesis on distributivism is flawed. [Note the difference with “about”: the digital economy is “around us” in a sense but distributivism is more abstract and is the theoretical basis for something, so “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 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).

There are some **prepositional phrases** that are especially helpful in academic writing (this is not by any means a complete list):

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 at the time.

As a consequence [of]: *As a consequence*, Darwin's views were adopted by the scientific community.

References

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

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