

# UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

## PREPOSITIONS AND PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

### Phrases

A phrase is a group of two or more words that does not contain a subject and a verb working together. There are many types of phrases, including verb phrases, adverb phrases, and adjective phrases. Each of these groups of words acts together as a single part of speech.

### Prepositions

A preposition is a word that shows the relationship between a noun or pronoun and another word.

Common prepositions are shown in the table below:

about	before	by	into	past	unto
above	behind	concerning	like	since	up
across	below	down	near	through	upon
after	beneath	during	of	throughout	with
against	beside	except	off	to	within
along	besides	for	on	toward	without
among	between	from	out	under	
around	beyond	in	outside	underneath	
at	but*	inside	over	until	

\* “but” is only a preposition when it means “except”

Note: Some of these listed prepositions (like “after” and “before”) can also act as adverbs or subordinating conjunctions. Look for the object of a preposition to determine if the word is acting as an adverb or a preposition.

### Prepositional Phrases

The prepositional phrase consists of a preposition, the object of a preposition, and all its modifiers.

A prepositional phrase may be used as an adjective or an adverb.

Examples:

- *I placed the flowers on the flowered tablecloth.*

The preposition is “on”; the object of the preposition is “tablecloth”; “flowered” modifies “tablecloth.” The entire prepositional phrase is therefore “on the flowered tablecloth.” This phrase answers the question “where”—I placed it where? On the tablecloth—making “on the tablecloth” an adverb prepositional phrase.

- *The box without a label arrived at our house.*

“Without a label” is an adjectival prepositional phrase, describing (modifying) the box.

“Label” is still the object of the preposition “without.” “At our house” is an adverbial prepositional phrase, answering the question *where* and modifying “arrived.” “House” is the object of the preposition.

- *Look in the drawer with the scissors!*

This sentence has two prepositional phrases. The first, “in the drawer with the scissors,” is an adverb, modifying the verb “look.” The phrase answers the adverb question *where*:

Where should I look? In the drawer. “Drawer” (and its modifying phrase “with the scissors”) is the object of the preposition “in.” The second prepositional phrase, “with the scissors” is an adjectival phrase, modifying the noun “drawer.” (To repeat, since “with the scissors” modifies “drawer,” it is part of the prepositional phrase that begins “in”).

### Exercises

Find the prepositional phrases in the following sentences. Then mark the object of the preposition and indicate which part of speech the prepositional phrase functions as (adjective or adverb).

Remember that prepositional phrases can exist within other prepositional phrases!

1. In 2016 I tried snowboarding for the first time.
2. I frequently fell on my butt and once put my head in a snowbank.
3. Afterwards, I had green and yellow bruises on my knees under my knee pads.
4. I took a hike down a ravine to a pond with clouds of vicious mosquitoes.
5. The bridesmaid's dress was a terrible shade of pink with small orange dots.
6. The commentator on the radio mentioned a book about saturated fats in fast food.

Answers: Phrases are in bold; objects of preposition are italicized. (1) **In 2016** (answering the question “when”) and **for the first time** (answering the question “under what condition”). Both are adverbial prepositional phrases modifying the verb “tried.” (2) **on my butt** (an adverbial phrase answering “where” I fell) and **in a snowbank** (an adverbial phrase answering “where” I put my head). (3) **on my knees under my knee pads** (adjectival phrase describing “bruises”) and **under my knee pads** (adjectival phrase describing “knees”). Note: Afterwards is not a preposition here; it is an adverb since it has no object of the preposition. (4) **down a ravine to a pond with clouds of vicious mosquitoes** (adjectival phrase modifying “hike”) and **to a pond** (adjectival phrase modifying “ravine”) and **with clouds** (adjectival phrase modifying “pond”) and **of vicious mosquitoes** (adjectival phrase modifying “clouds”). (5) **of pink with small orange dots** (adjectival phrase modifying “shade”) and **with small orange dots** (adjectival phrase modifying “pink”). (6) **on the radio** (adjectival phrase modifying “commentator”) and **about saturated fats in fast food** (adjectival phrase describing “book”) and **in fast food** (adjectival phrase modifying “fats”).

Credit: Adapted from Lydia Fash, University Writing Program, 2008, 2021.

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