

Prepositions of Direction

Prepositions of direction indicate the location of a noun (a person, place, or thing) in relation to another noun. Prepositions precede a noun or a pronoun and often accompany verbs of motion. This handout covers the prepositions *to*, *toward*, *on*, and *in* when they are used to express movement, direction, or purpose.

To can express movement in the direction of a physical place.

- I walked *to* the Writing Center from my car.
- Tim ran *to* school because he was late.

To can also express purpose when attached to a verb as an infinitive.

- They stayed after school *to* complete the assignment.
- I exercise *to* stay in shape.

Toward, like *to*, suggests movement. However, *toward* indicates movement in the direction of a general area rather than a specific destination. *Toward* implies that the destination may not have been reached.

- John traveled *to* San Francisco. (This means John physically arrived at San Francisco.)
- John traveled *toward* San Francisco. (This means John may have passed San Francisco or stopped before he arrived there.)

Other prepositions of direction are created by adding *to* to the prepositions of location *on* or *in*.

Onto (*On + To*) is used to express movement toward the outside of an object.

- The cat jumped *onto* the table.
- The leaf fell *onto* the sidewalk.

Into (*In + To*) indicates movement toward the inside of an object, space, or volume.

- Mary jumped *into* the water.
- Paul got *into* the shower.

In many cases, *on* or *in* can be used without *to*. Adding *to* to the preposition implies action, whereas *on* or *in* by themselves imply position.

- Suzy is *on* the bed. (This sentence simply relates Suzy's position.)
- Suzy jumped *onto* the bed. (This tells us not only that Suzy is on the bed, but also relates the action she took to get there.)

Exercises

Complete the following exercises by filling in the correct preposition.

1. I placed the glass _____ the table.
2. Jim went _____ the library yesterday.
3. Jane jumped _____ the swimming pool.
4. I ran _____ class in order _____ arrive on time.
5. We drove _____ the mountains but stopped before we got there.
6. Maggie, our cat, jumped _____ the table.
7. I study hard _____ do well on tests.
8. He dropped the ice cubes _____ the glass of water.

Answer Key: 1. onto 2. to 3. into 4. to/to 5. toward 6. onto 7. to 8. into

Work Consulted:

“Prepositions of Direction.” The OWL at Purdue. Purdue University Writing Lab. 11 February 2009.
<<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/esl/eslprep.html>>.