"Onto" vs. "on to"

Onto, on, and to are prepositions of direction. (See our handout on “Prepositions of Direction.”) People commonly mistake the usages of “onto” and “on to.” However, if people know the meanings of these prepositions, they can avoid confusion.

"To"
1) Use “to” as a preposition to describe the direction of movement toward a destination.

Example: I ran to the store.

Example: She hurried to the meeting.

2) Add “to” before a verb when a verb is in the infinitive form.

Example: She loves to laugh.

Example: Sarah’s mom told her to smile.

Note: When placed before an infinitive, “to” is not a preposition.

"On"
1) Use “on” as a preposition to describe position.

Example: The book is on the shelf.

Example: The ball is on the roof.

2) Use “on” as a particle as part of a phrasal verb.

Example: He must move on from past mistakes.

Example: She had nothing to add on after her speech.

3) Use “on” interchangeably with “onto” following action verbs. In the following two examples, “placed” and “landed” are both action verbs.

Examples: She placed the book on the shelf.
          She placed the book onto the shelf.

Examples: The ball landed on the roof.
          The ball landed onto the roof.
“Onto”
Use “onto” as a preposition to describe the direction of an object moving toward a surface.

Example: She set the box onto the table.
Example: The children hurried onto the bus.

One trick to check if “onto” is correct is to see if “on” can replace “onto.”

Example: I set the box onto the table.
In this sentence, “onto” is correct because using “on” and “to” separately would mean the sentence could read, “I set the box on in the direction of the table.” But the box was not set in the direction of the table but, more specifically, on top of it. Using the trick, it would still make sense to say, “I set the box on the table.” Using either “on” or “onto” could work in this case.

Example: Susan continued on to the park.
This sentence uses “on to” instead of “onto” because Susan did not actually move on top of the park, but she “continued on” (phrasal verb) “to” (in the direction of) “the park.” Using the trick, it would not make sense to say, “Susan continued on the park.” Therefore, “onto” does not work.

Activity
Choose the correct usage of “on to” or “onto” in the following sentences.

1. Anne led the group (on to/onto) the next station.

2. Robert set his laptop (on to/onto) his desk.

3. I did not know the answer, so I moved (on to/onto) the next question.

4. Taylor went (on to/onto) become a famous singer.

5. Adam jumped (on to/onto) his father’s shoulders.

6. In a game of tug-of-war, people must hold (on to/onto) the rope for as long as possible.

7. The wave washed (on to/onto) the shore.

Answer Key for Activity

1. on to
2. onto
3. on to
4. on to
5. onto
6. onto
7. onto

References

“Prepositions of Direction: To, On (to), In (to).” Purdue University Online Writing Lab. 25 February 2013. Web. n.d.