

“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

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