

## In, On, and At: Prepositions of Time and Place

A preposition is “a word governing, and usually preceding, a noun or pronoun and expressing a relation to another word or element in the clause.” (from *The Oxford English Dictionary*)

The definition from Oxford is perhaps a more complicated way of saying that a preposition is a word showing the relationship between a noun and another noun, a verb, or an adjective.

### Why Are Prepositions Tricky?

If you are frustrated with prepositions, you are not alone. Many consider prepositions the hardest tool of grammar to master because they are so numerous and do not always have specific rules that cover their usage.

For instance, you just have to remember that we *think about*, *talk about*, *dream about*, but never *share about*. There are, however, a few often-used prepositions like *in*, *on*, and *at*—the prepositions of time and place—whose usage follows a rule that is easy to remember.

### Prepositions of Time and Place: the Smaller to Bigger Rule

When using the prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at* for time and place, you will find that as you go from more specific (smaller) to more general (bigger), *at* gradually turns into *on*, which gradually turns into *in*.

Consider the following examples.

#### Place

When you want to reveal your location at a precise area, you use the preposition *at*.

<p><b>Examples:</b> I live <i>at</i> 1234 Sesame Street #2. I am eating <i>at</i> Subway.</p>
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When you want to reveal your location on a street or boulevard, use *on*.

<p><b>Examples:</b> I live <i>on</i> Sesame Street. Subway is <i>on</i> Orange Boulevard.</p>
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When you want to reveal your location in a city, state, country, or beyond, use *in*.

<p><b>Examples:</b> I live <i>in</i> San Jose. San Jose is <i>in</i> California. California is <i>in</i> the United States.</p>
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### Time

When referring to time, just as with place, *at* turns into *on*, which turns into *in* as you go from smaller to bigger.

When you want to talk about a meeting at a specific time, use *at*.

**Examples:** I will be here *at* 9:30.  
I will meet you at Philz Coffee *at* 1:30 p.m.

When you are referring to a day or a date, use *on*.

**Examples:** I will be there *on* Tuesday.  
My essay is due *on* September 25.

When you are referring to a season, month, or year, use *in*.

**Examples:** My birthday is *in* November.  
I am going to go on a sabbatical; I will see you *in* 2015.  
I am glad Christmas is *in* the winter; winter is my favorite time of year!

Now that you have examples of when to use the prepositions *in*, *on*, and *at*, practice using them the way you would in a real paper.

### Activity: Prompt and Response

You and a friend are trying to meet at a local Philz Coffee, but there is a problem. Your friend is a Martian who is visiting Earth for the first time. The only thing he has at his disposal, except for a high-tech spacecraft, is Google Maps. It is your duty to direct him to the specific location of the Philz Coffee where you want to meet. Since the meeting will be in about a month, you also need to explain to him what time you want to meet, going from the precise time, to the day, to the month. Use the following words correctly with their prepositions.

Address: 1101 Fernando Street #2  
City: San Jose  
State: California  
Country: United States, North America, Northern Hemisphere  
Time: 1:30 p.m.  
Date: Tuesday, September 17  
Season: summer  
Year: 2013

Remember, your goal is to use *in*, *on*, and *at*.

## References

Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*. 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2013. Print.

“Prepositions for Time, Place, and Introducing Objects.” *Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)*.

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