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.

Examples: I live at 1234 Sesame Street #2.
I am eating at Subway.

When you want to reveal your location on a street or boulevard, use on.

Examples: I live on Sesame Street.
Subway is on Orange Boulevard.

When you want to reveal your location in a city, state, country, or beyond, use in.

Examples: I live in San Jose.
San Jose is in California.
California is in the United States.
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

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

Purdue Online Writing Lab. *n.d.*. Web.