Prepositions in academic writing

Prepositions are small words that show a relationship between one word and another word in English. They may not exist in another language, or they may be used differently. For example, we can say 'The banana is in the bowl' in this picture,

even though it is not actually in the bowl but is sitting on top of the other fruit. We can say 'in the bowl' because we think of the banana as part of the whole collection of fruit, not as a separate item.

In English, we often see things as concepts and do not examine them literally. That means we can use many prepositions in academic writing. For example, we can talk about an *essay <u>on</u> chocolate*. Perhaps we think of the essay as sitting *on* the topic of chocolate.

We use *on* because it is the basis for something.

Here are the prepositions most commonly used in academic writing, with some explanations for their use:

about – around something or enclosing something
at – connected to a location
for – with a purpose or giving a reason
from – the origin of something
in – completely or partly enclosed by something
of – belonging to something or someone; contained in something
on – the basis for something
to – in a direction
with – connected to something and near something; using something

Often there are clues that tell us which preposition to use. e.g. *in* often follows a word with the prefix *in* or *en – involved in*; *instructing us in; engaging them in*. The preposition *with* often follows a word with the prefix *com* or *com.*

You also need to consider whether to match your preposition to the word **before** it or the word **after** it.
e.g. The thesis concentrated ***on*** works by contemporary authors.
Here, the preposition *on* follows the word *concentrated*. It does not match the word *works*.

If we rewrite the sentence, we might need a different preposition:

e.g. You can see this *in* works by contemporary authors.

Here, the preposition *in* goes with the word *works* because the verb *see* does not require a preposition.

Some verb + preposition combinations are called 'phrasal verbs'. These verb + preposition combinations are difficult to understand, because the meaning is often hard to guess from the individual words. For example, *write up* means *finish*.

In the prepositions song in the video, we can see different uses of prepositions, all from Averil Coxhead's Academic Word List:

An essay *on* statistics
Involved *in* linguistics -
How do prepositions work and how can we be sure *of* them?
I've heard *on* good authority
In English the majority
Of people think that prepositions are too hard *to* learn.

Research *in*
Language that's
Relevant *for* paragraphs.
Theories *about*
Strategies *for*
Linking nouns and verbs.
If you're writing *up* a
Sentence *about*
Photographs and monographs,
Then don't forget
The meaning *of*
These tiny little words.

Under, *on* or *over*
In or *out* or *under*,
Many prepositions are not easy to discern.
Instructing us *in* writing,
Isn't it exciting?
These words add all the richness *to* the languages we learn.

Here are the other sentences in the videothat have prepositions. Nearly all the prepositions are taken from the Academic Word List, which means that you will often see them in academic writing:

- Harumi was looking *for* a book on Australian cooking -

- a book *of* Australian recipes, in fact.
- She had been to a lecture *on* local cuisine
- and she was involved *in* an experimental cooking group.
- The criteria *for* membership were that you had to enjoy cooking and you had to be a professional chef.
- She felt very positive *about* this
- and had consulted her employer *about* trying some new recipes.
- Harumi's been shot – *with* a revolver
- – *in* the library.
- I saw her go *into* the library.
- There's no one but us *in* the house.
- The murderer must be someone *in* this room!
- We all had access *to* it.
- It belongs *to* Prince Wolfgang,
- and Kareena was looking *at* it.....
- ...and Prince Wolfgang has a certificate *in* shooting.
- I can't think of any motive *for* killing her.
- Harumi was an expert *in* the kitchen.
- Quite a contrast *to* the chef they had last year.
- Harumi never imposed her ideas *on* us,
- and she nearly converted me *to* Japanese cooking!
- But she never lectured me *about* it.
- I suppose she had the odd publication *on* cooking.
- She was the author of many books *about* cooking!
- She must have had an enormous impact *on* Japanese cooking
- in Australia.
- Well, let's not rely *on* rumours.
- The bulk *of* her work was not that good.
- She had a wonderful attitude *to* cooking.
- Prince Wolfgang confined himself *to* soup.
- Harumi had to substitute sorbet *for* ice cream *for* my dessert.
- She was very understanding *about* it, though.
- Two of us had meals that were adapted *to* our dietary needs.
- But I'm only aware *of* one person who didn't enjoy their meal.
- There was an interval *of* ten minutes
- *between* the time we finished dinner and the time you joined us.
- Not enjoying a meal is not a motive *to* kill someone.
- You and Harumi both published widely *in* the area of cooking.
- You both did research *on* Asian cooking in Australia.
- Last year you both contributed *to* a new cookery book,
- but she wrote five chapters *on* Japanese cuisine,
- and you only wrote a paragraph *on*
- the art *of* cutting potatoes.
- She had recently replaced you as President *of* the Academy *of* Celebrity Chefs.
- she was a great challenge *to* you.

- You never really recovered *from* the shock of her success.
- I'd like to apologise *on* behalf *of* everyone here, Gordon.
- I'm not biased *towards* anyone,
- but you must admit that someone who doesn't enjoy learning *about* grammar is a bit suspicious!

A good way to check which preposition to use is to consult an English learner's dictionary. Here are some links: Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the Macmillan English Dictionary, Merriam Webster's Learner's Dictionary and the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

Another good way to check prepositions is to use a concordancer. A concordancer is a computer program that searches the uses of a word in a corpus (a collection of texts). There is a good free concordancer at the University of Adelaide. It is called AdTAT [link], and it has clear instructions about how to use it and how to make your own corpus. You could make a corpus of articles in your subject area and then check it in the concordancer to see how prepositions are used.

Cognitive linguistics – for advanced grammar lovers
Cognitive linguistics gives some excellent explanations for prepositions. Some terms that are important are:

subject (Lindstromberg, 2010), **figure** (Talmy (in Tyler & Evans, 2003) and Brala, 2002), **trajector** (Langacker, 2010), **target** (Vandeloise, 1991)

and

ground (Talmy (in Tyler & Evans, 2003) and Brala, 2002), **landmark** (Lindstromberg, 2010, Langacker, 2010 and Vandeloise, 1991)

e.g. The computer (= subject, figure, trajector, target) is *on* the desk (= ground, landmark)

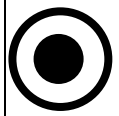
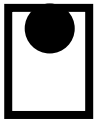
In a cognitive linguistics approach, we do not link actual objects with prepositions; instead, we link our conceptions of objects (Brala, 2002). However, when learning prepositions, it is often useful to learn a literal meaning first and then apply it to a non-literal (figurative) meaning (Boers & Demecheleer, 1995, p. 203).

We tend to position things in terms of what we are more likely to know (Vandeloise, 1991). We would therefore say *The word is on page ten* but probably not *Page ten contains the word*. This is because we can locate page ten more easily than a single word on that page.

Sometimes we use our everyday understanding of the world to help us choose a preposition (Vandeloise 1991, p. 34). For example, we can say that a banana is *in* a bowl of fruit, even when it is not technically in a bowl but on top of the other fruit in the bowl, because we know the other fruit will support it. This may not be possible in languages other than English. We also tend to see things in terms of people (Vandeloise 1991, p. 38). e.g. *the foot*

of the page; *the back of a book*. *Foot* and *back* are terms usually used to describe human bodies, but we can apply them to other things too.

Bowerman and Pederson (in Brala, 2002, p. 37) constructed a continuum using the words *on* and *in* in English, and discovered that other languages used a similar continuum. Here is a version using several different languages and presented in a slightly different order to Bowerman and Pederson's version. (Ms Parrot's version is in a different order based on her English respondents' feedback. It should be noted that Bowerman and Pederson did much more extensive research on this than Ms Parrot did, but the overlaps with different languages are still interesting.)

	Clingy attachment *Raindrops on window*	Hanging over/against *Picture on wall*	Fixed attachment *Handle on cupboard*	Point-to-point attachment *Apple on twig*	Encircle with contact *Ring on finger*	Support from below. *Cup on table*	Marks on a surface *Writing on paper*	Impaled/ spitted on *Apple on stick*	Pierces through *Arrow in(to)/through apple*	Partial inclusion *Cigarette in mouth* 	Still partial inclusion *Apple in bowl*	Inclusion *Apple in box* 
English (Julia Miller's order)	on	on	on	on	on	on	on	on	in(to)	in	in	in
Portuguese	em	em	em	em	em	em	em	em	em	em	em	em
Bahasa Indonesia	di	di	di	di	di	-	di	-	-	di	di	
French	sur	à	à	à	à	à	à	à	à travers	à		à
Bengali	-	upore	upore	tanano (hanging)	lagano	sonjukto	modhe	upore	vitore	vitore	modhe	
Polish	-	-	-	-	przycze-pione	-	-	przebity	w	w	w	
German	auf	auf	an	an	an	an	an	an	in	in	in	
Danish	på	på	noesten?	på	på	på	i	i	gennem	i	i	
Hindi	par	par	par		par		mein (finger in ring)	par	mein	mein	mein	mein

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My thanks also to **Rod Mitchell** for many insightful comments on the LinkedIn Applied Linguistics forum.