

PREPOSITIONS: AT, IN or ON?

Since English has no cases, prepositions play an important role in expressing relations between two people, things or places. The usual problem with English prepositions is that students need to learn most of them by heart, since not all of them can be literally translated from Croatian.

Here we are going to focus on the three most commonly used prepositions in English: *in*, *on* and *at*.

For a start, try and do the first exercise by following your instinct. Choose between *in*, *on* and *at*:

1. What are you doing after work _____ Friday?
2. Can you come to a lunch meeting _____ noon _____ Wednesday?
3. The stars shine _____ night.
4. Tom has to pick up a client at the airport. Her flight arrives _____ 10:00 _____ the morning.
5. The offices will be closed for cleaning _____ Thursday, March 24th.
6. Where will you go _____ Christmas?
7. Susie lives _____ the 5th floor _____ 21 Oxford Street _____ London.
8. They will launch their new line of products _____ spring.
9. Oh no! I left my umbrella _____ the bus!

Key: 1 on, 2 at, on, 3 at, 4 at, in, 5 on, 6 at, 7 on, at in, 8 in, 9 on

Did you have any doubts about certain phrases? One of the most common mistakes the students make is related to the days of week, when saying 'in Friday' or 'in the bus' (typical examples of a literal translation from Croatian). However, there are certain rules about the use of these three prepositions:

- **'IN'** - mostly used with three-dimensional, enclosed spaces and the following:

| | |
|---|---|
| IN | months (<i>in July, in December</i>) |
| | seasons (<i>in winter, in summer</i>) |
| | countries, cities (<i>in France, in Paris</i>) |
| | places, areas and containers (<i>in the kitchen, in the country, in a bag</i>) |
| | times of the day (<i>in the morning /afternoon / evening</i>)* |
| | centuries and long periods (<i>in the 19th century, in the past</i>) |
| | years (<i>in 1999, in 2005</i>) |
| fixed expressions (<i>in cash, in advance, in a hurry, in person, in touch, in time =early enough to do something, in the middle, etc.</i>) | |

*but *at night, at noon, at midnight*, except: *It rained in the night* (a short time during the night).

- **'ON'** – mostly used with two-dimensional spaces and the following:

| | |
|--|---|
| | days and dates (<i>on Saturday, on 8th October</i>)* |
| | surfaces (<i>on the table, on the wall</i>) |
| | means of transport (<i>on the bus /train / plane</i>)** |

| | |
|-----------|--|
| ON | fixed expressions (<i>on the first floor, on the phone, on foot, on time = at the right time, on vacation, etc.</i>) |
|-----------|--|

*notice the difference: in the morning – on Monday morning (specific morning)

** but *in the car*

➤ **'AT'** – mostly used with three-dimensional reference and the following:

| | |
|-----------|--|
| AT | precise time (<i>at 9 o'clock, at 10 p.m.</i>) |
| | time of the day (<i>at lunchtime, at noon, at sunset</i>) |
| | locations and positions (<i>at the bus stop, at the door</i>) |
| | locations and positions (<i>at the bus stop, at the door</i>) |
| | fixed expressions (<i>at school, at work, at university, at the front /back, at present, at a good price, at a loss /profit, etc.</i>) |

*but: *on Christmas Day*

**American English: *on the weekend*

Here it is important to mention that when the above-mentioned phrases are used with words such as **last, next, every** and **this**, we do not use prepositions:

- We went to Madrid last May. (*not in last May)
- Do we have a meeting this morning? (*not in this morning)
- I go home every Christmas. (* not at every Christmas)
- Next Tuesday I have an important presentation. (*not on next Tuesday)

Now that we have revised these basic rules and examples, it is time to test your memory.

1. Complete the gaps with the correct prepositions.

- a) I am working ____ a project to introduce a new service for next year.
- b) Bill often speaks to his clients ____ the phone.
- c) Your ticket says that your seat is ____ the third row.
- d) When you see the Microsoft office building, turn left ____ the traffic lights and there you will see the post office.
- e) Sandy always sits ____ the furthest chair ____ the meeting room.
- f) Paris is ____ the river Seine.
- g) ____ the moment he is doing a research ____ the side effects of their new drug.

Key: a) on, b) on, c) in, d) at, e) on, in, f) on, g) at, on

2. Underline the correct prepositions in the following sentences:

- a) 'Waiter, can we sit **on / at** the table by the window?'

- b) My sister often works **at / in** home **on /in** the evenings.
- c) My clients should arrive **on / at** the airport **on /in** time, but I don't think they will be **on / in** time to do some shopping.
- d) We sold the business **in / at** a good price.
- e) Can you increase the size of the text **in / on** the screen?
- f) The tables appear in the Appendix **on / at** the back of the report.

Key: a) at, b) at, in, c) at, on, in, d) at, e) on, f) at