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 on 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 video that 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


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.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English (Julia Miller’s order)</th>
<th>on</th>
<th>on</th>
<th>on</th>
<th>on</th>
<th>on</th>
<th>on</th>
<th>on</th>
<th>on</th>
<th>on</th>
<th>in(to)</th>
<th>in</th>
<th>in</th>
<th>in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>em</td>
<td>em</td>
<td>em</td>
<td>em</td>
<td>em</td>
<td>em</td>
<td>em</td>
<td>em</td>
<td>em</td>
<td>em</td>
<td>em</td>
<td>em</td>
<td>em</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahasa Indonesia</td>
<td>di</td>
<td>di</td>
<td>di</td>
<td>di</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>di</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>di</td>
<td>di</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>sur</td>
<td>à</td>
<td>à</td>
<td>à</td>
<td>à</td>
<td>à</td>
<td>à</td>
<td>à travers</td>
<td>à</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>upore</td>
<td>upore</td>
<td>tanano (hanging)</td>
<td>lagano</td>
<td>sonjukto</td>
<td>modhe</td>
<td>upore</td>
<td>vitore</td>
<td>vitore</td>
<td>modhe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>pryczke-pionie</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>przeczyty</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>w</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>auf</td>
<td>auf</td>
<td>an</td>
<td>an</td>
<td>an</td>
<td>an</td>
<td>an</td>
<td>an</td>
<td>an</td>
<td>in</td>
<td>in</td>
<td>in</td>
<td>in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>på</td>
<td>på</td>
<td>noesten?</td>
<td>på</td>
<td>på</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>gennem</td>
<td>i</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindi</td>
<td>par</td>
<td>par</td>
<td>par</td>
<td>par</td>
<td>mein (finger in ring)</td>
<td>par</td>
<td>mein</td>
<td>mein</td>
<td>mein</td>
<td>mein</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 box
Inclusion Apple in box
References


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