

Universidad de Los Andes
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Escuela de Idiomas Modernos

The Prepositions AT, IN, ON¹

AT. The uses are as follows:

(1) *To denote the place where something (or someone) is, or where something occurs.*

The post office is at the corner of the street.

Mr. Brown is at the office.

The accident occurred at the crossroads.

I will meet you at the railway station.

Other prepositions can, of course, also be used to denote place: e.g. *in, on, by*. These, however, express a relationship between the place and the person or thing concerned, whereas *at* expresses no relationship.

The place need not be a locality; it may be some function or event.

I first met him at a dinner-party given by a friend of mine.

How many people were there at the lecture?

There was almost a riot at the cup-tie.

As regards place-names, *at* is generally used before the names of villages and smaller towns, *in* before those of larger towns, but it is impossible to lay down any hard-and-fast rule; much depends on the context or on circumstances.

The Free Trade Hall is in Manchester. (Here the city of Manchester is meant.)

Passengers for Liverpool, change *at* Manchester. (Here *Manchester* denotes the railway station.)

Are you going to make your future home *in* Cranford, Colonel? - Harold Brighthouse, *Followers*.

(*In Cranford*, because the speaker is already there.)

The names of large areas like countries, provinces and counties, and the names of roads and streets, normally take *in*; but *at* is used before the name of a road or a street if it denotes either a railway station, or the point at which the street or road in question intersects with another on a bus route.

¹ Taken from: Wood, F. T. (1967). English Prepositional Idioms. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.

For the British Museum, alight at Tottenham Court Road.
Does this bus stop at Great Portland Street?

(2) *To denote a point in time, either by the clock or by some festival or similar occasion that is regarded as a landmark in the year.*

The concert starts at half past seven.
At one time farms used to change hands at Michaelmas.
We do not often get it as warm as this at Christmas.

Before the names of days, *on*, not *at*, is used; before the names of months and the four seasons of the year, *in*. Periods of the day (morning, afternoon, evening) take *in*, but points of time in the day take *at*: *at dawn*, *at sunset*, *at noon*, *at dinner-time*. Note also *at night* and *at night-time*, but *in* (or *during*) *the night*, *in* (or *during*) *the night-time*.

(3) *To denote a place, or a point of time, as one of a series.*

At the second roundabout, turn left.
At the third stroke it will be 5.37. (Announcement by the telephone 'speaking clock'.)
He passed his driving test at the fifth attempt.

(4) *After the verb **to arrive**, to express the point reached.*

It was past ten o'clock when he arrived at the office.
At last we have arrived at our destination.

But the verb *reach* itself is transitive, and takes no preposition.

We reached our destination at 6.30.

Certain senses of *reach*, however, may be expressed by *get at*.

You should always keep poisons where children cannot get at them.
The ripest apples are at the top of the tree, where it is difficult to get at them.

(5) *To express a state or condition in which things, persons or groups of persons are.*

The two tribes were constantly at war.
I never feel at ease in his company.
Now I know my fears are groundless, my mind is at rest.
We were at a loss to explain the occurrence.

(6) *With the sense of 'engaged in' (some activity). This use often has more or less the same meaning as a present participle.*

He is at work on a new invention.
She loved to watch the children at play.
I do not like to be disturbed while I am at dinner.
The manager is at lunch, and will not be back until two o'clock.

This use has given rise to two colloquial expressions.

(a) *At* used in the sense of 'doing'.

I must go and see what those children are at.

(b) *At it* = doing something.

He's always at it; he never gives himself any rest. (Here *it* has no specific reference; it has merely the sense of activity in general.)

He's at it again! (What activity *it* stands for is understood from the context, circumstances or situation.)

(7) *To express circumstances.*

He left at a moment's notice.

At a pinch we could manage without any extra money.

At a guess, I should say there were about a hundred people present.

(8) *To express manner.*

He vaulted over the gate at a single leap.

(9) *To express reason.*

I have called to see you at the request of a friend.

At the suggestion of our parents, we deferred the visit to the museum until the following day.

(10) *To express the condition on which something is done.*

Cars are parked at their owners' risk.

An extra book may be borrowed, at the discretion of the Librarian.

(11) *To express the rate either of movement or of the charge made for goods or services.*

The car raced through the countryside at sixty miles an hour.

We walked along at an easy pace for the next few miles.

Eggs are sold at forty pence a dozen.

Four hours at twenty-five pence an hour comes to one pound.

(12) *To express the occasion that leads to something taking place.*

At the mention of money, the stranger became attentive.

Sometimes the idea of occasion is combined with that of cause.

She felt sure she would faint at the sight of blood.

(13) *To express motion towards, or to represent the object of **at** as the recipient of some activity.*

As we passed the gate a dog flew out at us.

The policeman looked at us suspiciously.

He kicked violently at the door.

It sounded as if someone were tapping at the window.

(14) *After certain adjectives and nouns expressive of capabilities or attainments, to specify the field in which the capabilities, etc., lie.*

That boy is clever at mathematics.

I am no good at chess.

He is an expert at repairing clocks.

IN. The uses are as follows:

(1) *Expressing (a) position or enclosure within a particular place, area or object, and (b) entry to or placing within such place, object or area.*

Brighton is in Sussex.

The parcel was wrapped in paper.

Oh, to be in England, Now that April's there! (Robert Browning, *Home Thoughts from Abroad*)

She put the money in her purse.

I saw him go in the shop.

(2) *Expressing external physical environment.*

They lost themselves in the fog/in the dark.

Similarly: *in the snow, in the rain, in the wet, in the cold, in the sunshine, in the dusk.*

(3) *To express external circumstances, or non-material conditions.*

The last few years of his life were spent in poverty.
They settled in a remote village, where they could live in peace.
You should consider yourself in luck (i.e. lucky) to get such an opportunity.

Similarly: in *luxury*, in *comfort*, in *difficulty*, in *straitened circumstances*.

(4) *To indicate bodily, physical or material condition.*

He has not been in good health for some years.
They found the patient in a coma.
The house is in a good state of repair.

(5) *To express a mental or emotional state or condition.*

It was obvious that she was in great distress.
He went in fear of his life.
Many who came in despair went away in hope.

(6) *To indicate a period of time throughout the whole of which, or within which, something takes place.*

A fast train does the journey to London in three hours.
We should be able to complete the work in five days.
Some people have their main meal at midday, others in the evening.

Note. If a particular day is named, *on* is used (*on Saturday*, *On July 27th*, *on New Year's Day*, *on my birthday*), but *in October*, *in summer*, *in the Christmas holiday's*, *in 1966*, *in the eighteenth century*, *in ancient times*, *in earlier times*, *in modern times*, but *at the present time*, *at the present day*.

(7) *To indicate lapse of time by reference to a point at the end of a specified period.*

I cannot see you now; come back in half an hour (or 'in half an hour's time').
We shall have to make haste; the taxi will be here in five minutes.

Note: The use of *in* in sentences of the type 'They ate as if they had not had a good meal in years' is an Americanism which is beginning to appear in British English. The accepted British idiom is *for years*.

(8) *To express state or condition by reference to the external appearance, or an external characteristic, of the person or thing in question.*

The house was in ruins.

The poor girl was in tears.
Her clothes were in rags.
His shoes were in holes.
The string was all in knots.

(9) *To indicate the spirit by which one is actuated in doing something.*

I only said it in fun.
She spoke in grief rather than in anger.

Similarly: *in jest, in joke, in spite, in fairness, in revenge, in mercy, in sorrow.*

(10) *Denoting a printed, written or oral context where something occurs or is to be found.*

I read it in *The Times*.
Feste is the clown in *Twelfth Night*.
The vicar was speaking of that very thing in his sermon last Sunday.
There may be nothing in the rumour. In what poem do these words occur?

(But 'I heard it *on* the wireless, *on* the radio, *on* television', *on* the grapevine, etc.)

(11) *To indicate location.*

Selfridge's is in Oxford Street.

I have rheumatism in my left shoulder.
He is deaf in one ear.

(12) *To indicate an activity which one is pursuing or by which one is occupied.*

Her whole life was spent in helping others.
When we arrived she was engaged in a telephone conversation.

(13) *To express an attitude of mind.*

Most of those present were in favour of the proposal.
He is not in favour with the powers that be.
I am entirely in sympathy with all you say.
We seem to be in agreement on the matter.

(14) *To indicate a characteristic of one's conduct or of an activity one performs.*

Everyone seemed in a hurry.
We had to leave in haste.
Don't be in haste to come to a decision.

Similarly: *in a rush, in a bustle, in an uproar, in a panic.*

(15) Expressing range, scope or limit.

The bus is not yet in sight.
It is not in my power to do that.
I am willing to consider any request in reason.

(16) *To indicate membership of, or inclusion in, a group, organisation or profession.*

My eldest son is in the navy.
He holds quite an important post in the Civil Service.
She had one uncle in the medical profession and another in the church.

In this group may also be included *to be in business* and *to be in trade (as a bookseller)*.

Note. *In Parliament, in the Cabinet, but on the Town Council, on a committee, on a board of directors.*

(17) *To convey the idea of 'holding', 'fastened within', 'projecting from', 'within the area of', etc.*

He carried a parcel in his hand.
He had a cigarette in his mouth.
There was a nail in the wall.
I noticed a hole in his coat.

(18) *With the meaning 'in respect of', or 'as regards'.*

In shape the object was circular.
They are quite reasonable in price.
The houses were rather old-fashioned in design.

(19) *To refer to a person's character.*

He has no malice in him.
I didn't think he had it in him to do such a thing.

There is something of the same sense when *in is* used in reference to the quality or character of inanimate things: e.g. 'There is no flavour in these apples'.

(20) *To suggest conditions that have arisen or that may arise: e.g. in case, in that case, in the circumstances, in the eventuality, in the event of.*

(21) *To indicate the material of which something is made, the colour of it, or the medium used.*

We have furniture of this design in oak and in walnut.
You can get these dresses in silk or in nylon.
I like the pattern, but I should prefer it in green instead of red.
Did you say the portrait was in oils, or in water-colour?

In this class also may be included 'to speak in English', 'to write in ink', etc. (i.e. using English or ink as the medium). But 'to speak in riddles' denotes the manner of speaking, not the medium used.

(22) *To indicate manner, conveying the general idea 'in the form of'.*

The water shot up in a fountain.
They stood in a queue.

Similarly: *in a circle, in a line, in a row, in a heap, in a pile.*

(23) *To indicate division or grouping.*

The plank was sawn in two.
The eggs were packed in dozens.
People stood about in twos and threes.
Cigarettes are sold in tens and twenties.

(24) *To express cause.*

The child screamed in terror.
He gave the information in hope of a reward.
The gods, in their wisdom, have hidden the future from us.

(25) *With the meaning 'by way of'.*

He said nothing in reply to my question.

Similarly: *in answer, in response, in imitation.*

(26) *With the meaning 'so far as (something) is concerned'.*

It is all right in theory, but it won't work in practice.

(27) *Indicating conformity to a pattern, rhythm, etc., as in time (musical), in tune, in step, in harmony.*

SPECIAL USES: The following special uses should be noted:

- (1) *In* followed by an adjective to indicate form or manner: in *short*, in *brief*, in *earnest*.
- (2) **In** followed by *the + an* adjective, to indicate a state: *in the nude*, *in the raw*.
- (3) **In** followed by *the + a* verbal noun: *in the know* (having private information), *in the swim* (familiar with the latest developments).
- (4) *In* followed by a gerund, to express an adverbial sense.

In saying this, I do not imply any criticism of your conduct of the affair. (i.e. when I say this)

You should be very careful in crossing the road. (i.e. when you cross the road)

She discovered the missing packet in turning out a cupboard. (i.e. as she was turning out a cupboard)

- (5) *A similar construction expressing an adjectival sense.*

My purpose in writing to you is to ask your advice. (i.e. for which I am writing to you)
(See also class (12) above.)

ON. The uses are as follows:

- (1) *To indicate position in relation to another object.*

The dog was sleeping on the mat.

A mirror hung on the wall.

He had mud on his shoes.

- (2) *To represent a place, an object, or a part of the body as the recipient of an activity.*

She knocked on the door.

They sat down on the seat.

The stone hit him on the head.

The passer-by touched me on the shoulder.

- (3) *To indicate locality, i.e., the place where something stands or is situated.*

The school is built on the site of an old mansion.

London stands on the Thames.

Cf. also certain place-names compounded with *on* or *upon* Southend-on-Sea, Harrow-on-the-Hill, Stratford-on-Avon, Newcastle upon Tyne.

(4) *To indicate a means of support from beneath.*

A tripod is so called because it stands on three feet.
The roof of the building is supported on pillars.

(5) *To indicate a means of supporting life, an organisation, a business, etc., or of paying one's way.*

They lived mostly on vegetables from their garden.
Her pet dogs were fed on the choicest food.
He finds it difficult to live on his salary.
You can't afford luxuries, on an income of twelve pounds a week.

(6) *To indicate the means by which something is enabled to work, or to perform its function.*

Many locomotives nowadays run on oil.
For many years he ran his business on a staff of only five.
You can't do a hard day's work on a cup of coffee and a slice of toast.

(7) *To express direction in relation to some person or object.*

Take the first turning on your right.
Enter by the door on the left-hand side as you approach the building.

(8) *To express membership of a group or body; e.g., on the committee, on the Town Council, on the board of directors, on the staff, on the Stock Exchange, on the Senate of the University.*

(But *in the army, in the navy, in the Civil Service, in the church*, etc. See under IN.)

(9) *Followed by a verbal noun, to express a passive idea for a transitive verb, and an active one for an intransitive.*

On show (= being shown), *on trial* (= being tried), *on sale* (= being sold), *on exhibition* (= being exhibited), *on parade* (= parading).

In a few phrases, like *on duty* and *on holiday*, the active idea can be expressed by *on* followed by a non-verbal noun. *On duty* = doing the duty assigned to one; *on holiday* = having a holiday; *on leave* = having one's leave; *on night work* = doing night work.

(10) *To express the idea of 'engaged in doing something'. (Colloquial.)*

At the moment I am on a rather difficult piece of work (i.e. engaged in doing a rather difficult piece of work).

He has just published one novel and is already on a second (i.e. engaged in writing a second.)

(11) *To express grounds, reason or condition.*

On his doctor's advice, he took a month's holiday.

He did it on the instructions of his superior.

We have it on the authority of Pope that a little learning is a dangerous thing.

He called to see me on business.

I can only do it on the understanding that I am not held responsible for the outcome.

The two men were arrested on a charge of housebreaking.

(12) *To indicate time (used only for specific days): on Wednesday, on Sunday evening, on Boxing Day, on June 25th, on my birthday.*

(For times of the clock *at* is used (*at six o'clock*), and for parts of the day, when used in a general sense (evening, morning, afternoon), months, seasons, centuries, and vague periods such as *youth, old age, etc., in*. But *on* occasions, *on various occasions, on several occasions*, although these do not refer to specific days and *on Saturday morning, on Tuesday evening, etc.*)

(13) *To indicate the subject of a book, article, talk, lecture, etc.* In this sense *on* means more or less the same as *about, or concerning*: a book on Milton; an article on space travel; a talk on modern jazz; a lecture on Tennyson; an essay on the pleasures of walking.

Related to this is the use of *on* in the sense of *about* in sentences such as the following.

Do you have any ideas on the subject?

I have had second thoughts on that matter.

(14) *To suggest the idea of one thing or one action following immediately after another, or of being almost simultaneous with it.* (In this case **on** is followed by a gerund or by some kind of verbal noun.)

On hearing the crash, he rushed out of the house.

On receipt of the news, I immediately telephoned my solicitor.

On his stepping out of the taxi, he was seized by two men.

There is often a suggestion of reason, as well as sequence, attaching to *on* in this type of construction, which links it with class (11) above.

(15) *To suggest the basis of an arrangement or a transaction*: to buy *on credit*; to let something out *on hire*; to have goods *on hire-purchase*; to take something *on trust*; to have something *on loan*; to be *on parole*; to be *on probation*; to have goods *on approval*.

(16) To indicate an objective relationship between the noun or pronoun that follows *on*, and the word that precedes it (usually a noun or an adjective).

Don't be hard on the child.

He was very strict on discipline.

I am not keen on cold mutton.

It's hard luck on John, having to work while the rest of us are on holiday.

The bully had no mercy on his victims.

(Similarly, *have compassion on*, *have pity on*, etc.)

(17) With the sense 'at the expense of'.

He is just a scrounger, who lives on other people.

The next round of drinks is on me.

(18) Followed by *the* + a verb used as a noun, to suggest an idea akin to that expressed by the present participle.

Keep the kettle *on the boil* (= boiling).

The enemy is *on the run* (= running).

He is always *on the make* (= trying by all kinds of means to make money).

Similarly, *on the march*, *on the mend* (of the state of things or of a person's health), *on the prowl*, *on the move*, *on the scrounge* (slang), *on the go* (active, doing something), *on the look-out*, *on the watch*, etc.

To catch someone on the hop means to catch him doing something (usually something that he should not be doing, or something he does not wish others to know about), when he least expects it, and is therefore off his guard.

(19) Followed by *the* + an adjective, to make a phrase expressive of an adverbial sense: e.g. *on the sly*, *on the quiet*, *on the cheap*. These phrases usually have a slight sense of disapproval about them; and they are not exactly equivalent in meaning to the corresponding adverb. To do something *quietly* is to do it without making much noise, but to do it *on the quiet* suggests doing it secretly or surreptitiously. To get things *on the cheap* suggests a certain degree of meanness, which 'to get things *cheaply*' does not.

ON ACCOUNT OF = Because of; owing to.

Trains from Newcastle may be up to twenty minutes late, on account of repairs to the track.

On account of the weather, we had to cancel the projected outing.