

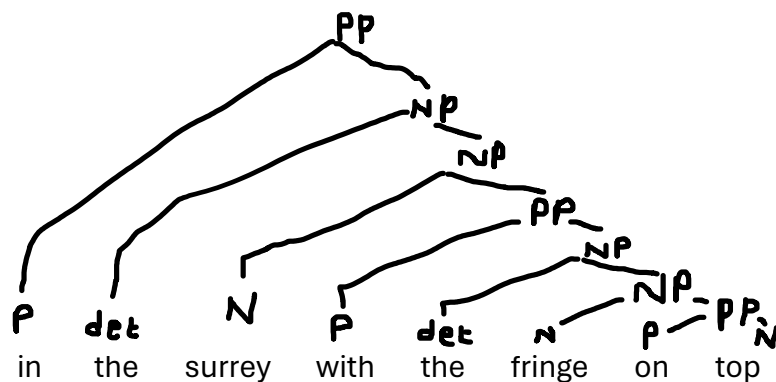
prepositional phrases

A prepositional phrase has a preposition as head, followed by a complement. There are many variations on this pattern, but most prepositional phrases you'll identify consist of:

PP → preposition complement NP

- under the couch
- on the big rock candy mountain
- in the surrey with the fringe on top

Note that the third example contains three prepositional phrases, "nested":



Prepositional phrases have many grammatical functions, especially as postmodifiers in noun and adjective phrases, and as adverbials. These two main uses sometimes look identical, so you have to stay aware of meaning and possible flexibility (or its lack) in word order.

- I petted the kitten with the kinky tail (postmodifies "kitten")
- I petted the kitten with a gentle hand (adverbial)

The latter PP, being adverbial, can move around the sentence; it is not attached to the kitten.

- With a gentle hand, I petted the kitten.
- I petted, with a gentle hand, the kitten.

The former PP is attached to the kitten, inside a noun phrase, and cannot move.

- *With a kinky tail, I petted the kitten.

Prepositions are a large but finite, closed class of words. You can google "lists of English prepositions" and find many such lists, all of them basically the same if longer or shorter. The most common are probably "at, by, of, off, for, from, in, on, over, to, with, under," and those 12 probably account for the majority of all preposition uses in English.

Prepositions don't have much meaning of their own, and they don't occur on their own except when their complement is understood. "I live at my parents' house" / "That's the house I live in." Prescriptive grammarians will tell you not to "strand" the "in" at the end of the second sentence without a following complement, but people do it in speech because the complement is obvious. "That's the house I live in" obeys the "laws of nature" of idiomatic English.

Prepositions, in fact, are highly idiomatic. Because they lack obvious meaning (aside from opposites like "over" and "under"), which preposition to choose to convey a certain meaning is not logical. Native speakers acquire a vast range of idiomatic senses of prepositions; adult language learners struggle with them and either have to memorize many cases, or depend on getting "close enough." Think, for instance, of cooking a fish:

- I fried it in the black pan
- I fried it on High
- I fried it at the stove
- I fried it over a flame
- I fried it by candlelight
- I fried it for five minutes
- I fried it with onions
- *I fried it by Low
- *I fried it at the burner
- *I fried it with five minutes

The last three "errors" might be made by advanced ESL speakers who know a lot about English prepositions but still have not mastered all the cases. (And of course, English speakers make similar preposition errors when learning other languages.)

In addition to uses as postmodifiers of nouns or adjectives, and as adverbials, prepositional phrases are used as complements of verbs, again in a highly idiomatic way. Melding a verb with an idiomatic preposition is one of the primary ways of extending the meaning of English verbs. For now, think of the range of meanings in just these uses:

- Please speak to him.
- Don't talk at him.
- I wish you would talk with him.
- You speak for all of us.

And in the following examples, the paired preposition becomes, in effect, a two-word verb.

- Can you talk over that idea with him?
- Don't talk down to me.
- I talked through my concept with him.
- I talked up the project.
- I talked him into supporting us.