Prepositions and Idiomatic Expressions

Using prepositions --the most frequent ones are at, by, for, from, in, on, to, and with --can be a tricky task, but remembering some basic rules about their uses are helpful in the overall writing process.

Prepositions commonly define a time or place, though there are other areas where they can be used. Between the eight listed above, some of them can employ subtle yet significant differences depending on the context in which they are used.

Take, for example, three of those commonly used prepositions: at, on, and in. All three can be used to express time or place. The following instances of their usage should prove helpful in keeping them in proper context.

TIME:

AT: Let's meet at 4:30 p.m.
ON: The doctor's appointment is on Tuesday.
IN: The sun rises in the morning.
IN: I was born in 1987.
IN: My sister finished her reading in 3 hours.

Notice how at is displaying a specificity with time, while on can convey a particular day or date. In is multi-faceted because it can be used to express something occurring in a part of a 24-hour period (in the morning), in a specific year or month (in 1987), or in a set period of time (in 3 hours).

PLACE:

AT: We will meet at the restaurant.
AT: I am sitting at the table.
AT: We will turn right at Stadium Drive.
ON: I am lying on the beach.
ON: The store is on Madison Avenue.
ON: I am watching basketball on television.
IN: The rake is in the garage.
IN: My house is in Tuscaloosa.
IN: I read about it in a book.

All three of those prepositions, as noted above, can be used to express a certain location. At can express a meeting place or location, somewhere at the edge of something, at the corner of something, or at a target. On can express something being placed or located on a surface, on a particular street, or on an electronic medium such as television or the Internet. Finally, in can
convey the sense of something being located in a particular enclosed space, in a geographic location, or in a print medium, such as a book or in a magazine.

**USING NOUNS AFTER PREPOSITIONS**

Prepositional phrases incorporate a preposition with a noun, which is sometimes in the form of a gerund, or the -ing form of the noun. For example:

> My mother is great at cooking.

**COMMON ADJECTIVE + PREPOSITION COMBINATIONS**

In certain cases in the English language, though not necessarily all languages, specific adjectives are always accompanied by certain prepositions. Some common examples of this are opposed to, scared of, aware of, familiar with, and others.

> John is opposed to the tax proposal.
> I am scared of ghosts.
> My dog is aware of the squirrel.
> Natasha is familiar with the area.

**COMMON VERB + PREPOSITION COMBINATIONS**

In addition to the common adjective and preposition combinations, it is also important to know that frequently certain verbs and prepositions are almost always used with one another in idiomatic phrases. Some common examples of this are participate in, rely on, arrive at, forget about, and others.

> I will not participate in the march.
> My father will rely on the bus to get to work today.
> We will arrive at the house in one hour.
> It's important not to forget about the meeting.

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This handout is adapted from University of Alabama Writing Center Website. Only the format has been changed.