

# 78 Prepositional phrases

A

## By, on or in + noun

I took his pen **by mistake** [I thought it was my pen].  
These shoes are made **by hand** [not using a machine].  
I met them **by chance** [it wasn't planned; it was luck].



He broke the plate **by accident** [he did not want or plan to do it].



He broke the plate **on purpose** [he wanted to do it; it was his intention].

My boss is **on the phone** at the moment. [using the phone]  
The workers are **on strike** [they refuse to work because of a problem over pay, hours, etc.].  
The books were **on display** in the window. [in the window for people to look at]  
Part of the building was **on fire** [burning].  
Most of the passengers are now **on board** [on the train, boat, plane, etc.].  
Why are they always **in a hurry** [needing to do something or go somewhere very quickly]?  
I explained everything **in detail** [including all the important information].  
She won't make that mistake again **in future**.  
The poor little girl was **in tears** [crying].

B

## Phrases easily confused

Sometimes two prepositions can be used with the same noun, but the meaning is different.

Lessons begin at 8.30 and the students are usually here **on time** [at 8.30].

If we hurry, we'll be there **in time** [before the time we need to be there].

We were tired of waiting, so **in the end** we went home. [finally, after a lot of time or thought]

**At the end** of the book they get married. [in the last part]

To be successful **in business** it's important to get on well with people. [working as businesspeople]

They're both in Germany **on business** [they are there for work, not a holiday].

I'm afraid this book's a bit **out-of-date** [old and not useful, or not correct in its information].

I try to keep **up-to-date** with all the changes. [knowing all the most recent ideas and information]

I'll see you **in a moment** [not now, but very soon; *syn* **in a minute**].

I can't speak to you **at the moment** [now; *syn* **right now**].

### Common mistakes

I'm busy **at the moment**. (NOT I'm busy *in this moment*.)

## Exercises

### 78.1 Put the nouns into the correct columns.

|       |        |          |         |        |
|-------|--------|----------|---------|--------|
| board | hand   | accident | display | detail |
| fire  | future | mistake  | tears   | strike |

| on    | in | by |
|-------|----|----|
| board |    |    |
|       |    |    |

### 78.2 Choose the correct word to complete the sentences.

- I'm afraid I deleted your email *on / in / by* accident.
- Did she hit him *on / by / in* purpose?
- I just saw them *with / by / on* chance.
- Most of these files are *out-of- / out-from- / out-for-* date.
- My wife is away *in / on / by* business at the moment.
- I'm afraid I'm busy *on / in / at* the moment.
- I've got to go; I'm *in / on / at* a hurry.
- I won't go there again *on / in / at* future.

### 78.3 Complete the missing noun in these prepositional phrases.

- I saw smoke coming out of the window, and I realised the house was on *fire*.
- Nobody is at the factory. The workers are all on .....
- These chocolates are expensive because they are all made by .....
- I'm just going to the shop but I'll be back in a .....
- I'm sure she broke that vase on .....; she never liked it.
- I'm sorry I can't stop to talk now – I'm in a .....
- She never thanked me for the present, so I won't buy her another one in .....
- You can't trust things you read on the Internet; a lot of the information there is out-of- .....
- I told them everything they wanted to know. I explained it all in .....
- I went to the exhibition, and some of Katya's paintings were on .....
- The manager can't speak to you at the .....; I'm afraid she's on the .....
- It was a terrible journey but we got there in the .....

### 78.4 Replace the underlined word(s) with a prepositional phrase.

- The meeting was planned for 11 am and we got there at 11 am. *on time*
- Did you get to the cinema before the film started? .....
- Most of the factory is burning. .....
- I had great difficulty finding the camera I wanted, so finally I bought one on the Internet. ....
- He gets killed in the last scene of the film. ....
- I'm afraid I'm very busy right now. ....
- I saw her yesterday but we didn't plan to meet. ....
- I'm writing an email, but I'll be with you very soon. ....
- Most of these books are old and the information is wrong. ....
- I explained the system with all the important information. ....