

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I'm afraid this book's a bit **out-of-date** [old and not useful, or not correct in its information].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