



FREE RESOURCE · GRAMMAR

Prepositions of place

Prepositions of place show where a person or thing is. Use **in** for an enclosed space or area, **on** for a surface or line, and **at** for a point or a place where you do something. Words like **between**, **opposite**, **next to** and **above** add more exact detail.

What to know

The big idea: in, on and at

Three small words cause most place mistakes, so start with the picture behind each one.

- *in a classroom · in the city centre*
- *on the wall · on the second floor*
- *at the bus stop · at the entrance*

Patterns worth learning as chunks

Many place phrases are fixed. It is faster to learn them whole than to work out the rule each time.

- in a country, a city, a town, a village
- on a street, a road, an island, a coast
- at the airport, at the station, at the door, at a desk
- on a screen, on a map, on the internet, on the phone
- in the picture, in the newspaper, in the sky

Other prepositions that give exact positions

In IELTS Writing Task 1 maps and in Speaking Part 2 descriptions, you often need more exact words than **in**, **on** and **at**. Here are the ones you will use most.

- *The library is opposite the station. · A bridge goes over the river.*
- *The park lies between the school and the hospital. · The cafe is next to the bank.*

Mistakes to avoid

The most common error is using **in** for every place, because many languages use one small word for all three ideas. Say **at** the bus stop, not **in** the bus stop. Say **on** the second floor, not **in** the second floor.

A short method for choosing

When you are not sure, ask three quick questions. Is it an enclosed space or area? Use **in**. Is it a surface, a line or a floor of a building? Use **on**. Is it a point or a place where an activity happens? Use **at**. If none of these works, check whether the phrase is a fixed chunk, such as **on a bus** or **at the airport**, and learn it as a whole.

Exercises

1. My sister lives _____ a small flat in Leeds.
a. on

b. in

c. at

2. The seminar room is _____ the third floor.

a. on

b. in

c. to

3. Wait for me _____ the bus stop.

a. on

b. at

c. in

4. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) Students often study (2) in the library (3) or sit (4) in the bus stop.

5. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) In my country, (2) most students live (3) at a dormitory (4) near the campus.

6. Describe the map. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): the central / station. / The museum / is opposite / between

7. Correct this: *She is waiting in the bus stop.*

8. The village lies _____ the river and the mountains.

a. above

b. between

c. among

9. A new bridge goes _____ the river, so cars can cross.

a. between

b. under

c. over

10. I read the news _____ my phone.

a. on

b. in

c. at

Practise online, free: hear every example and check your answers at www.ielts-laboratory.co/free-resources/prepositions-of-place/practice/

IELTS tip. In Speaking Part 2, a few exact place words make a description easier to follow. In Writing Task 1 on maps, use between, opposite, next to and near so the reader can picture each change, and check that each phrase says only one position.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Prepositions of place

AIM	Learners choose in, on and at by the picture behind the place, and use between, opposite and next to to give exact positions.
TIME	30 minutes
LEVEL	B1 to B2 (IELTS 5 to 6.5)
MATERIALS	This worksheet, one copy per learner; the free online practice for the audio

Warm-up

Draw a simple map of a street on the board. Ask learners to say where their house is in relation to a landmark, using only the words in, on and at.

Lesson steps

1. Show three pictures: a book in a box, a book on a table, a person at a desk. Elicit the idea behind each word before giving the rule.
2. Put learners in pairs with a labelled map. One describes where a place is, using between, opposite and next to; the other draws it.
3. Collect common errors (in the bus stop, at Canada) on the board and let learners fix each one using the three questions in the article.
4. Learners write six true sentences about their own town using at least four different prepositions.

Extension

Give learners a Task 1 style map with two time periods and ask them to describe three changes, using only place prepositions to show position.

Answer key

1. b) in. A flat is an enclosed space, so we say in a flat. We say on a floor but in the flat itself.
2. a) on. A floor of a building is treated as a level, so we use on.
3. b) at. A bus stop is a point on a route, so we use at.
4. Part 4: *in the bus stop*. → **at the bus stop**. A bus stop is a point, so the right word is at. On and to do not fit the meaning.
5. Part 3: *at a dormitory* → **in a dormitory**. A dormitory is a building you live inside, so we say live in.
6. The museum is opposite the central station. Opposite is followed directly by the place it faces. Between would need two places.
7. She is waiting at the bus stop. A bus stop is a point, so the preposition is at.
8. b) between. There are exactly two things, the river and the mountains, so we use between.

9. c) over. A bridge that crosses a river goes over it. Under would put the bridge beneath the water.

10. a) on. We use on for screens and devices: on the phone, on a laptop, on a screen.

Questions learners often ask

What is the difference between in, on and at for place? In is for enclosed spaces and areas, on is for surfaces and lines, and at is for points or the place of an activity. A city is in, a street is on, and a bus stop is at.

Do we say in the street or on the street? British English usually says in the street for the general idea. With a street name both in and on are heard: in Oxford Street and on Oxford Street. Both are understood, but pick one style and keep it.

Is it on the bus or in the bus? Say on the bus, on a train and on a plane. We say in a car and in a taxi because they are smaller vehicles.

How can I learn prepositions of place quickly? Learn them in short chunks with a picture, such as on the second floor and at the bus stop, and say each chunk aloud. Do not learn lists of single words.

Sources

- Swan, M. (2016). Practical English Usage (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (2006). Cambridge Grammar of English. Cambridge University Press.

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