



FREE RESOURCE · GRAMMAR

Prepositions of time

Prepositions of time show when something happens or how long it lasts. Use **at** for exact times, **on** for days and dates, and **in** for months, years, seasons and parts of the day. Use **for** with a length of time, **since** with a starting point, and **by** or **until** with a deadline or an end point.

What to know

In, on and at for points in time

Think of a funnel. At is the narrowest, for exact points. On is for days and dates. In is the widest, for longer periods.

- **at:** at 8.30, at night, at the weekend, at Christmas
- **on:** on Tuesday, on 12 June, on New Year's Day, on Sunday evening
- **in:** in April, in 1998, in the summer, in the afternoon

Some exceptions to learn

A few fixed phrases break the funnel rule. We say **at night**, but **in the morning**, **in the afternoon** and **in the evening**. In British English we say **at the weekend** for one weekend and **at weekends** for a regular habit. American English says **on the weekend** and **on weekends**. We say **at Christmas** and **at Easter** for the festival period, but **on Christmas Day** for one date.

- *at night · in the evening*
- *on Friday · on Friday afternoon*

For, since and during

For answers how long, and it goes with a length of time: for two hours, for six months, for a long time. **Since** answers from when, and it goes with a point in the past: since 2020, since Monday, since I was a child. Both usually go with the present perfect: I have lived here for five years. I have lived here since 2019.

By, until, before and after

Until means up to a point and a situation continues: I studied until midnight. **By** means no later than a point, usually for a deadline or a result: I must finish the report by Friday. The difference is that **until** describes a continuing action, and **by** describes something that happens before a limit.

In time and on time

These two phrases look similar, but they have different meanings. **On time** means at the planned time, neither late nor early: The train arrived on time. **In time** means early enough to do something: We arrived in time to catch the train. A third phrase, **in the end**, means finally, after a long process.

Exercises

1. The lecture starts _____ nine o'clock.
a. on

b. at

c. in

2. I was born _____ 1998.

a. in

b. on

c. at

3. We have a seminar _____ Tuesday afternoon.

a. at

b. on

c. in

4. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) I have (2) lived here (3) for 2019, (4) and I like it.

5. Begin with She. Put the words in order (one or more words are not needed): since / for / has worked / here / 2018. / She

6. Correct this: *My exam is in Monday.*

7. I stayed in London _____ three weeks.

a. for

b. during

c. since

8. I must finish the report _____ Friday at the latest.

a. since

b. by

c. until

9. Many people feel tired _____ the afternoon.

a. at

b. on

c. in

10. Find the mistake and write the right form: (1) The museum (2) is open (3) at Sundays (4) from nine to five.

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

IELTS tip. In Writing Task 1, time prepositions are central: in 2010, between 2005 and 2015, from March to June, by the end of the period. Use since and for with the present perfect for trends up to now, and check that every date has the right small word before it.

FOR TEACHERS · GRAMMAR

Prepositions of time

AIM	Learners choose the correct time preposition for dates, periods and durations, and separate for, since, by and until.
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

Ask learners when they were born, when their next holiday is, and what time they get up. Write the answers and highlight in, on and at.

Lesson steps

1. Draw the funnel on the board: at, on, in. Learners add three examples to each part from their own life.
2. Practise for and since with a timeline. Learners say how long they have studied English using both words.
3. Give pairs a diary page and ask them to say when each activity happens, using by, until, before and after.
4. Collect errors from the activity and fix them as a group.

Extension

Learners describe a table of dated figures with at least six different time prepositions.

Answer key

1. b) at. Exact clock times take at.
2. a) in. Years take in.
3. b) on. When a day is named, the preposition is on, even before a part of the day.
4. Part 3: *for 2019*, → **since 2019**,. Since goes with a starting point. For goes with a length of time.
5. She has worked here since 2018. Since goes with the starting point 2018, and has worked is the present perfect.
6. My exam is on Monday. Days of the week take on.
7. a) for. For goes with a length of time. Since needs a starting point, and during needs a named period.
8. b) by. By means no later than a point in time, which fits a deadline.
9. c) in. Parts of the day, such as the morning and afternoon, take in.
10. Part 3: *at Sundays* → **on Sundays**. Days of the week take on.

Questions learners often ask

When do I use in, on and at for time? Use at for exact times, on for days and dates, and in for months, years, seasons and parts of the day.

What is the difference between for and since? For goes with a length of time, such as for three years. Since goes with a starting point, such as since 2021.

What is the difference between by and until? By means no later than a time and is used for deadlines. Until means up to a time and goes with an action that continues.

Do I say at the weekend or on the weekend? British English usually says at the weekend. American English says on the weekend. Both are understood.

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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