



Prepositions of Direction: To, On (to), In (to)

Three prepositions that express movement toward something are **to**, **on(to)**, and **in(to)**.

1. The basic preposition of a direction is **to**. **To** signifies orientation toward a goal. When the goal is physical, such as a destination, **to** implies movement in the direction of the goal.

- **Example:** I am trying **to** study for my test.

When the goal is not a physical place, for instance, an action, **to** marks a verb; it is attached as an infinitive and expresses purpose. The preposition may occur alone or in the phrase **in order**.

- **Example:** The family traveled **to** Florida **to** visit family.
(destination) (in order to)

2. Verbs of motion, **on** and **in**, have a directional meaning and can be used along with **onto** and **into**. (See the sections below for some exceptions to this rule.) This is why **to** is inside parentheses in the title of the handout, showing that it is somewhat optional with the compound prepositions. Thus, the following sentences are roughly synonymous:

- **Examples:** The children threw their pennies **in/into** the fountain.
The cowboy jumped **on/onto** the back of the horse.
My father climbed up **on/onto** the roof to hang the lights.

Some verbs of motion express the idea that the subject causes itself or some physical object to be situated in a certain place. Of these verbs, some take only **on**. Others take both **on** and **onto**, with the latter being preferred by some speakers.

- **Examples:** The bird perched **on** the branch. (not onto the branch)
Her puppy must be kept **on** a leash. (not onto a leash)
He placed the star **on/to** the Christmas tree.
Sue spread the icing **onto** the cupcakes.

Verbs taking only **on** are rare: **set** may be another one, and so perhaps is **put**. Other verbs taking both prepositions are **raise**, **scatter** (when it takes a direct object), **pour**, and **add**.

- **Example:** The concrete was poured **on(to)** the street.
The pearls scattered **on(to)** the floor when the necklace broke.
The family decided to add **on(to)** the house when they ran out of room.

To the extent that these pairs do differ, the compound preposition conveys the completion of an action, while the simple preposition points to the position of the subject as a result of that action. This distinction helps us understand how directional and locational prepositions are related: they stand in the relationship of cause and effect.

Completion of an Action	Position of Subject
Jack climbed on(to) the roof.	Jack is on the roof.
We dropped the pennies in(to) the fountain.	The pennies are in the fountain.

3. Uses of *into*:

With verbs of motion, *into* and *in* are interchangeable except when the preposition is the last word or occurs directly before an adverbial of time, manner, or frequency.

- **Examples:** The students went **into** the classroom.
The students went **in**. (not into).
We went **into** the store to buy groceries this morning.
We went **in** this morning.

In an information question, *into* also can be last word except for an adverbial when its object is questioned by a **wh-** word:

- **Examples:** What kind of mess are you getting yourself **into**?
What kind of mess are you **in**?

Verbs expressing stationary position take only *on* or *in* with the ordinary meanings of those prepositions. If a verb allows the object of the preposition to be omitted, the construction may have an idiomatic meaning.

- **Examples:** The man sat **on** the bench
The teacher is **in** the classroom.
The professor is **in**. (available for meeting)

In(to) has two special uses with move. When *move in* is followed by a purpose clause, it has the sense of **approach**. In the following example, *in* is part of the verb, so you cannot use *into*.

- **Examples:** The cat **moved in** to pounce on the mouse.

When *into* is used with move, it functions as an ordinary preposition to convey the idea of moving something from one place to another.

- **Example:** I am going to **move into** my new house today.

4. Uses of *to*:

To occurs with several classes of verbs: **verb + to + infinitive**. Verbs in this group express **willingness** (be willing, consent, refuse), **desire** (desire, want, wish, ask, request, prefer) **intention** (intend, plan, prepare), or **obligation** (be obligated, have, need).

- **Examples:** I **refuse to** play games with someone who cheats.
While some people enjoy sports, I **prefer to** play the piano.
The student **prepared to** study abroad for the summer.
I **need to** go grocery shopping this weekend.

In other cases, *to* is used as an ordinary preposition. Verbs of communication: **listen, speak** (but not **tell**), **relate, appeal** (in the sense of '**plead,**' not '**be attractive**'). Verbs of movement: **move, go, transfer, walk, run, swim, ride, drive, fly, and travel**.

- **Examples:** I am **listening to** my favorite singer.
The friends **relate to** each other well.
I am **traveling to** Florida for vacation.

Additional Resources: Tufte, V. (2006). *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press.
Harris, M. (2006). *Prentice Hall Reference Guide*. (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.