Directional Prepositions

Directional prepositions show movement when they are used after a verb and before an object or place.

My little brother would often go into my room to take my toys without asking.

In this sentence, “would go” is the verb, and “my room” is the place that the subject of the sentence “my little brother” is moving into. “Into” is the preposition that indicates where the subject is moving in relation to the place.

Common Directional Prepositions
Here is a list of some common directional prepositions:

- across
- around
- away (from)
- between
- down (from)
- from
- in(to)
- off (of)
- on(to)
- out (of)
- over
- past
- through
- to
- toward

Optional and Not Optional Parts
In many cases, the preposition might be a combination of two prepositions that form one, such as with “onto,” “into,” “out of,” and “down from.” The “to,” “of,” or “from” that make up the latter half are often optional. In most of the following examples, whether you add the words in the parentheses or not, the meaning of the sentence is the same, and both ways sound natural.

I climbed up a ladder.
I placed a bucket of water on(to) the top of the door.
I climbed down (from) the ladder.
My brother tried to go in(to) my room.
My brother fell in(to) my trap.
The bucket fell off (of) the door.
The bucket fell on(to) my brother’s head.
Water rushed out (of) the bucket.

Writing either “the bucket fell off the door” or “the bucket fell off of the door” may simply be up to personal preference; however, some combinations of prepositions are not so flexible.

For example, you would say “I climbed up a ladder,” but not “I climbed up to a ladder” because that would change the meaning of the sentence. The first sentence implies that you are using an object, a ladder, to move upwards in the direction of a destination. The second sentence suggests
that you are moving upwards by some other means in order to reach a ladder. So, in the sense of the example’s narrative, you could say “I climbed up a ladder,” or even “I used a ladder to climb up to the top of the door,” but not “I climbed up to a ladder.”

Different Kinds of Places
Different kinds of places will take different kinds of directional prepositions, even if they are very similar places. For example, drivers either park on the street or in the driveway. The distinctions between “on,” “in,” and “at” can be particularly difficult. Here are some examples of different uses:

I walk on campus. I search for books in the library. I ask a question at the reference desk.
I read at school. I read in class. I read on break.
I nap in my bedroom. I sleep in bed, but I jump on the bed.

The different prepositions can mean subtly different things when applied to the same or different nouns. For example, “I ran into the building” means something very different than “I ran into the door.” In the first sentence, the speaker makes it into the building, but in the second sentence the speaker does not.

These prepositions are not interchangeable. “I run at the door,” “I run into the door,” “I run through the door,” and “I run to the door” all mean different things. “At” implies charging—an impending collision—and “into” describes a collision in this case. “Through” means that either the speaker opened the door and ran into the building or the speaker crashed through a closed door. “To” just shows readers where the speaker is going, not what happens once he or she gets there.

Conclusion
Directional prepositions describe the direction or location of the movement implied by a sentence’s verb. Like most prepositions, they are hard to define except in context. Now walk out of your dorm, across campus, into the library, down the stairs, and through the Writing Center’s doors to meet with a tutor!

Contact
Learning prepositions requires lots of practice. Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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