Mistakes with prepositions

Get off, get out of, take off, exit

One of the most common activities and still causing trouble; do we *get off, get out of, take off,* or *exit* buses, trains, planes, and cars? The answer is: It depends on the vehicle. First of all, the verb "exit" can be used with any conceivable vehicle or building, but it sounds very formal. Consider the following sentence:

> *Terminal station. Please exit the train. (a formal announcement used in the Prague metro)*

"Exit" was appropriate here, as the whole expression was supposed to be understood as a formal command. On the other hand, it is too formal for a normal conversation:

> *I must exit the bus at the next stop. (too formal for a normal conversation)*

In normal speech, the preferred expression for a bus, train, plane, and other public transport vehicles would be to "get off". Although you can say that you "take a bus" when you "get on the bus" (not "in"), you can't say that you "take off the bus" when you "get off":

> *I must get off (the bus) at the next stop. (correct)*
> *I must take off (the bus) at the next stop. (wrong)*

The difference between “get off” and “get out of” is a little bit more delicate. We get *off* public transport, but we get *out of* a (personal) car, and never the other way round:

> *Get off the bus at the next stop. (correct)*
> *Get out of the bus at the next stop. (wrong)*
>
> *Get out of the car after you arrive. (correct)*
> *Get off the car after you arrive. (wrong)*

For the sake of completeness, we should mention that “get out of the bus” could be used in case of emergency as a command. A driver who noticed the bus was on fire could shout, “Everybody get out of the bus!” Nevertheless, this is hopefully not something you will ever need to say.

Arrive at/in/to

Because of the influence of verbs like “come to”, “move to”, and “go to”, learners of English often tend to use the combination “arrive” + “to”. Although sentences such as “come to me”, “we moved to London”, or “are you going to the party?” are completely appropriate, “arrive” behaves somewhat differently.

There is only one context in which “arrive to” is appropriate, namely when “to” means “in order to”, for example:

> *The cleaner arrived [in order] to clean the office.*

When you want to express that you come to a country, city, or generally a geographical location, use “arrive in”. For example:

> *We will arrive in England at about 5 o’clock. (correct)*
> *We will arrive to England at about 5 o’clock. (wrong)*

> *Once you arrive in Paris, make sure to visit the Eiffel Tower. (cor.)*
> *Once you arrive to Paris, make sure to visit the Eiffel Tower. (wr.)*

In virtually any other situation, you should use “arrive at”:

> *When I arrived at the party, all my friends were already drunk. (cor.)*
> *When I arrived to the party, all my friends were already drunk. (wr.)*
>
> *Please, arrive on time at the meeting point. (correct)*
> *Please, arrive on time to the meeting point. (wrong)*

Although some people would argue that the last sentence is an example of “arrive on”, it is not so; “on time” should be treated as an idiomatic expression in its own right.

To be good at/in

When you want to express that you are well capable of doing something, the usual collocation is “to be good *at* something”, e.g.

> *He is good at playing the piano. (correct)*
> *He is good in playing the piano. (wrong)*

Some native speakers do use “to be good in” when they talk about classes at school, e.g. “he is good in science” in the meaning of “he performs well in his science class”. Others, however, consider such an expression unnatural, so you may want to avoid it altogether.

There are some idiomatic expressions where “good in” is appropriate, but these are rather rare. The most common one is “to be good in bed”, meaning “to perform well in sex”:

> *She is good in bed. (correct)*
> *She is good at bed. (wrong)*

Obviously, one cannot be good *at* bed, since "bed" is not an activity.

Different from/than/to

Is the meaning of "different from" different to "different than" and that of "different than" different from "different to"? I was just joking, but hopefully I've got my message across, namely that there's no difference in meaning among the three expressions.

The only difference is that of commonness. "Different from" (as in "A is different from B") is the most common one. "Different than" is used mostly in the United States and not so much in the UK, whereas "different to" is common in British English but uncommon in American English. Nevertheless, neither of them is considered incorrect on either side of the Atlantic, and you will be understood if you use any of the three.

On/in the photo

The equivalent expression in many languages would use a preposition translated usually as "on" (e.g. *sur* in French). In English, however, the correct preposition is "in":

> *The boy in the photo looks sad. (correct)*
> *The boy on the photo looks sad. (wrong)*

The pattern is the same no matter what word we use for the visual media (e.g. image, photo, picture, drawing):

> *There are no trees in the picture. (correct)*
> *There are no trees on the picture. (wrong)*

We only use “on” when we mean that something is on top of a physical object. For example “there’s a cup on a photo” means that the cup lies on a photo. “On” can also be used when one thing is part of the top layer of another thing. This can be a little confusing for words like “postcard”. We would say:

> *There’s a [picture of a] house on a postcard. (correct)*
> *There’s a [picture of a] house in a postcard. (wrong)*

The reason is that a postcard is the piece of paper itself, not what’s printed on it (unlike the word “picture”, which refers to the actual visual content). Similarly, if you saw a picture of a man drawn on an envelope, you wouldn’t say that there’s a man *in* the envelope, would you. The (picture of the) man is *on* the envelope.

Suited for/to

It’s hard to make a mistake in this case, as both “suited for” and “suited to” are correct, and the same applies to “ill-suited” and “well-suited”). Some native speakers feel there is a subtle difference in meaning, but for most the expressions are equivalent:

> *She is well suited for the job. (correct)*
> *She is well suited to the job. (correct)*

As for the hyphen, “well-suited” and “ill-suited” are used when they modify nouns, “well suited” and “ill suited” when “something is well/ill suited”, for example:

> *It’s such a well-suited car. (correct)*
> *It’s such a well suited car. (wrong)*

It is also quite widespread to say “well-suited to do something”, but it is usually more elegant to just omit verb:

> *This computer is well suited to the task. (correct)*
> *This computer is well suited to do the task. (less elegant)*

Married to/with

When you say that someone is or gets married, and you want to specify the person whom he or she marries, the correct preposition is “to”, not “with”, e.g.

> *Peter is married to Jane. (correct)*
> *Peter is married with Jane. (wrong)*

The same goes for “marriage with/to”. Although “marriage with” is sometimes used, especially when referring to historical marriages, such as that of a king or a queen, “marriage to” is much more common:

> *Her marriage to Peter wasn’t the happiest. (correct)*
> *Her marriage with Peter wasn’t the happiest. (unnatural)*

Time prepositions

The rules for time prepositions are relatively simple. We use “at” for a particular **time of day**:

- *at 5 o’clock*
- *at 9:37 am*
- *at noon*

- *at night*

We use “on” (not “at”) for a **particular day**:

- *on Tuesday*
- *on 17 June 2014 (on the seventeenth of June 2014)*
- *on Christmas Day*
- *on her birthday*

And, finally, we use “in” for months and longer periods (seasons, years, centuries, etc.):

- *in August*
- *in the winter*
- *in 1999*
- *in the last century*

There are a few expressions that don’t fit the scheme above. For **holidays lasting more than a day**, we usually use “at”:

- *at Christmas*
- *at Easter*

“**Morning**”, “**afternoon**”, and “**evening**” are preceded with “in the” when they mean a particular time of day:

> *I usually drink tea in the morning/afternoon/evening.*

When “in” or “at” clashes with “on” used for days, “on” wins:

- *on Monday morning*
- *on Wednesday afternoon*
- *on Friday evening*
- *on Sunday night*

Finally, when speaking about the **weekend**, the British use “at”, and Americans use “on”:

- *at the weekend [British English]*
- *on the weekend [American English]*

Call (to) someone

When you make a phone call, you *call someone*. There is no "to" in the English expression:

> *I have to call my mother to ask her something. (correct)*
> *I have to call to my mother to ask her something. (wrong)*

Perhaps you know the song *Call Me Maybe* (written and sung by Carly Rae Jepsen), which should help you remember to leave out the "to":

> *[...] but here's my number, so call me maybe. (correct)*
> *[...] but here's my number, so call to me maybe. (wrong)*

I've been here for/since/during time

For is used with an amount of time, and it expresses *how long* you have been doing something. "Since" is used with a date (or a time of day), and it expresses the date (or time) when you *started* doing something. For example, you can say:

> *I've been doing my homework for three hours. (correct)*
> *I've been doing my homework since three hours. (wrong)*

You must use "for" here because "three hours" is the *amount* of time you have spent doing your homework. On the other hand, in

> *I've been doing my homework since yesterday. (correct)*
> *I've been doing my homework for yesterday. (wrong)*

you can only use "since" because you express *when* you started doing your homework (yesterday), not how long you've been doing it.

Finally, some learners try to use “during” in such sentences instead of “for”, but such usage is not correct:

> *I’ve been doing my homework for three hours. (correct)*
> *I’ve been doing my homework during three hours. (wrong)*