



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

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

This handout explains prepositions that express movement toward something: to, onto, and into. First, the prepositions will be introduced as a group. Then, the special uses of each one will be discussed.

To, into, and onto correspond respectively to the prepositions of location at, in, and on. Each pair can be defined by the same spatial relations of point, line/surface, or area/volume. To learn more about the spatial relationships expressed by these pairs of prepositions, read the first section of ["Prepositions of Location: At, On, and In"](#) before you start reading this handout.

## **Introduction**

### **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.

(1) Sa'id returned **to** his apartment.



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.

(2) Li Ling washed her dog (in order) **to** rid it of fleas.

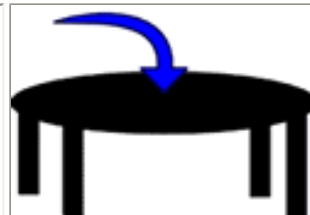
The two uses can also occur together in a single sentence:

Sa'id returned **to** school **to** get his books.  
(destination) (in order to)

## 2. The other two prepositions of direction are compounds formed by adding "to" to the corresponding prepositions of location.

The preposition of location determines the meaning of the preposition of direction.

ON + TO = **onto**: signifies movement toward a surface



IN + TO = **into**: signifies movement toward the interior of a volume

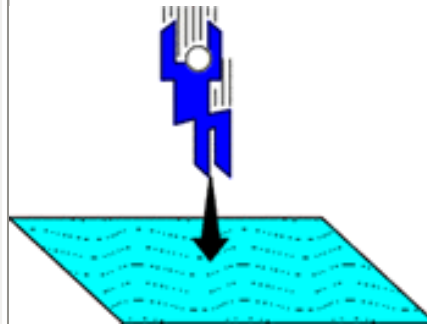


("To" is part of the directional preposition toward, and the two mean about the same thing.)

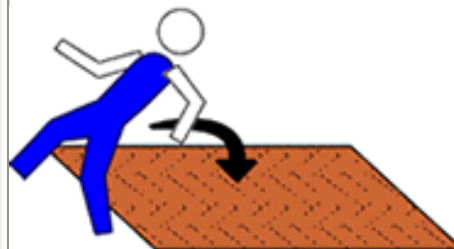
### 3. With many verbs of motion, "on" and "in" have a directional meaning and can be used along with "onto" and "into".

(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:

(4) Tai-shing jumped **in/into** the pool.



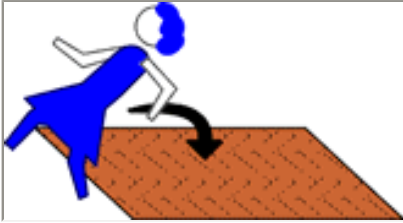

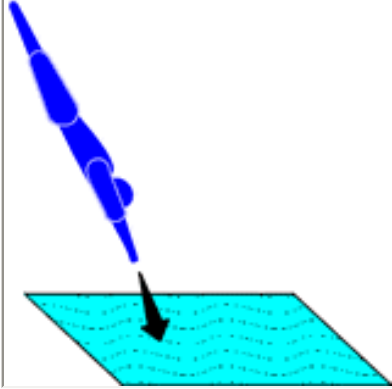
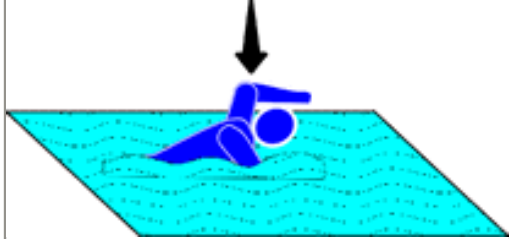
(5) Porfirio fell **on/onto** the floor.



(6) The crab washed up **on/onto** the shore.



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	
(7) Jean fell <b>on(to)</b> the floor.		Jean is <b>on</b> the floor.	
(8) Susumu dived <b>in(to)</b> the water.		Susumu is <b>in</b> the water.	

## Uses of "to"

To occurs with several classes of verbs.

### 1. verb + to + infinitive

Verbs in this group express willingness, desire, intention, or obligation.

- o **willingness:** be willing, consent, refuse
- o **desire:** desire, want, wish, like, ask, request, prefer
- o **intention:** intend, plan, prepare
- o **obligation:** be obligated, have, need

Examples:

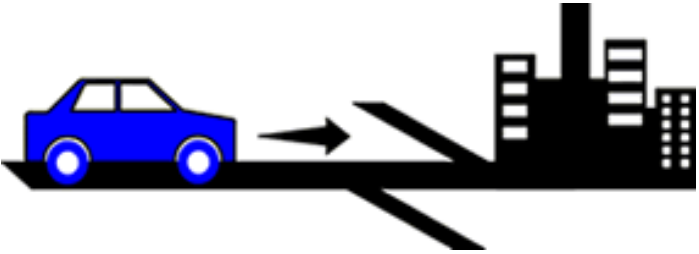


- (9) I refuse **to** allow you to intimidate me with your threats.
- (10) I'd like **to** ask her how long she's been skiing.
- (11) I plan **to** graduate this summer.
- (12) Henry had **to** pay his tuition at the Bursar's office.

### 2. 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, travel

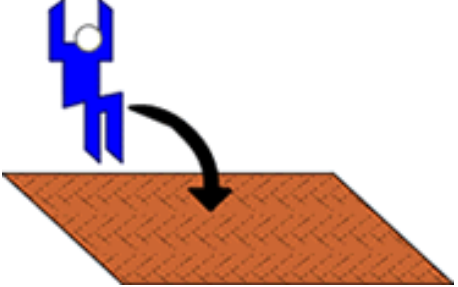

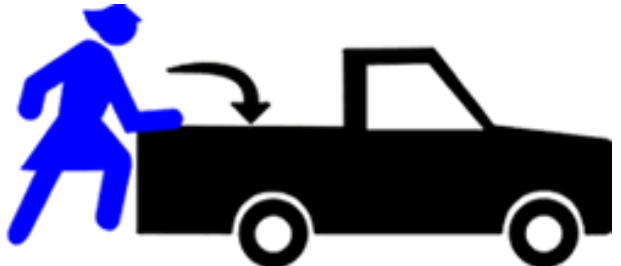
Except for transfer, all the verbs in (2b) can take toward as well as to. However, "to" suggests movement toward a specific destination, while "toward" suggests movement in a general direction, without necessarily arriving at a destination:

<p>(13) Drive <b>toward</b> the city limits and turn north.</p>	 <p>(Drive in the direction of the city limits; turnoff may be before arriving there.)</p>
<p>(14) The plane was headed <b>toward</b> a mountain.</p>	 <p>(It was headed in the direction of a mountain; it may not have reached or hit the mountain.)</p>
<p>(15) Take me <b>to</b> the airport, please.</p>	 <p>(I actually want to arrive at the airport.)</p>

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## Uses of "onto"

### 1. Onto can generally be replaced by on with verbs of motion.

<p>(16) Dietrich jumped <b>on(to)</b> the mat.</p>	 A blue stick figure is shown in mid-air, jumping towards a brown rectangular mat. A curved black arrow indicates the path of the jump from the person to the mat.
<p>(17) Huan fell <b>on(to)</b> the floor.</p>	 A blue stick figure is shown falling towards a brown rectangular floor. A curved black arrow indicates the path of the fall from the person to the floor.
<p>(18) Athena climbed <b>on(to)</b> the back of the truck.</p>	 A blue stick figure is shown climbing onto the back of a black truck. A curved black arrow indicates the path of the climb from the person to the truck.

### 2. Some verbs of motion express the idea that the subject causes itself or some physical object to be situated in a certain place (compare #15-17 above).

Of these verbs, some take only "on". Others take both on and onto, with the latter

being preferred by some speakers.

- (19) The plane landed **on** the runway. (not onto the runway)
- (20) Sam hung the decoration **on** the Christmas tree. (not onto the tree)
- (21) He placed the package **on** the table. (not onto the table)
- (22) Joanna spilled her Coke **on** the rug. (not onto the rug)
- (23) Samir moved the chair **on(to)** the deck.
- (24) The crane lowered the roof **on(to)** the house.
- (25) The baby threw the pot **on(to)** the floor.

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.

- (26) The farmer scattered seed **on(to)** the fertile ground.
- (27) We're adding **on** a wing at the back of the building.
- (28) We're adding a porch **onto** the house.

In (27), on is really part of the verb, while in (28) onto is a simple preposition. This contrast points to a fairly important and general rule:

**Simple prepositions can combine with verbs, but compound prepositions cannot.**

Note also that in (27), the word "on" has its ordinary meaning of a position on a surface, but in this case the surface is vertical rather than horizontal-- the side of a building. The use of "onto" in (28) is like its use in (24) and (25) above.

### **3. There are a number of verb-preposition combinations which are formally like "add on" but have the meaning "of continuing or resuming an action" when used in the imperative mood.**

(Not all of them have the force of a command.) Except for hang, which takes both on and onto, they all occur only with on. The meanings of these combinations, some of which are idiomatic, are given in parentheses.

- Hang on(to the rope)! ('continue to grasp tightly')
- carry on ('resume what you were doing')
- sail on ('resume or continue sailing')
- dream on ('continue dreaming'; a humorous way of saying 'that is an unattainable goal')

- lead on ('resume or continue leading us')
  - rock on ('continue playing rock music')
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## Uses of "into"

**1. 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.**

In this case only in (or inside) can be used.

(29) The patient went **into** the doctor's office.

(30) The patient went **in**. (not into)

(31) Our new neighbors moved **into** the house next door yesterday. ('to take up residence in a new home')

(32) Our new neighbors moved **in** yesterday.

In (32), the last word is the time adverbial yesterday, so the object of the preposition in (32) can be omitted. Of course, in an information question, "into" also can be last word except for an adverbial when its object is questioned by a wh-word:

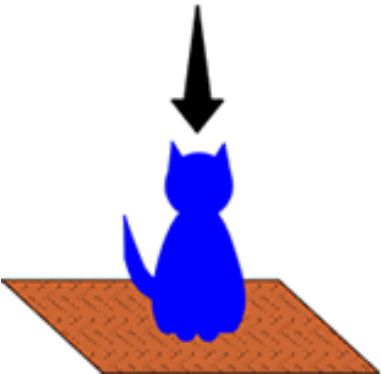
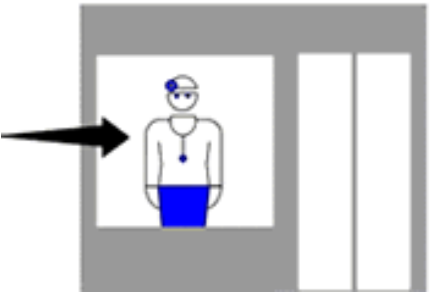

(34) Now what kind of trouble has she gotten herself **into**?

(35) Now what sort of trouble is she **in**?

**2. 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.



<p>(36) The cat sat <b>on</b> the mat.</p>	
<p>(37) The doctor is <b>in</b> his office.</p>	
<p>(38) The doctor is <b>in</b>. ('available for consultation')</p>	

In(to) has two special uses with move.

### 3. When "move in" is followed by a purpose clause, it has the sense of "approach".

(39) The lion moved **in** for the kill.

(40) The police moved **in** to rescue the hostages inside the building.

In (39) and (40) "in" is part of the verb, so "into" cannot be used; We cannot say: "The lion moved **into** for the kill."

### 4. When "into" is used with move, it functions as an ordinary preposition to convey the idea of moving

## something from one place to another.

(41) We'll move your brother's old bed **into** your room.



This use of "into" is like the use of onto illustrated in (24)-(27) and (29).

Exercises for this handout are available at  
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