



Prepositions of Place - In, On, At

How do we use "in", "on" and "at" for places?

Basic Explanation

Note: For most nouns, we can use "a", "the" or another determiner after the preposition. It depends on the sentence and context.

in

Generally speaking, we use "in" **if the thing or person is inside or surrounded by something.**

For example:

- in a box
- in a cup
- in a pocket
- in a drawer
- in a room
- in a house
- in a building
- in an apartment
- in a castle

We also use "in" for **some places outside.**

For example:

- in a garden
- in a forest
- in the city centre

Even though these places are outside, there is still the idea of being surrounded by something.

We use "in" for **many geographic locations**, like towns, regions, states, countries, etc.

For example:

- in Paris
- in California
- in France
- in the mountains
- in the city
- in the country

Note: You can say "in the countryside", but normally we just say "in the country".

It is **usually** used for **flat printed things**.

For example:

- in a picture
- in a book
- in a photo
- in a newspaper
- in a magazine
- in a letter

Example sentences:

- There is still some coffee **in the cup**.
- My keys are **in my pocket**.
- I saw Frank peeing **in the garden**.
- She lives **in Paris**, which is a city **in France**.
- They spent the weekend **in the mountains**.
- How many people are **in this picture**?
- I know it's true because I read it **in a book**.

on

Generally speaking, we use "on" for **surfaces**.

For example:

- on a couch
- on a table
- on a T-shirt
- on a wall
- on the floor
- on the ground
- on the ceiling
- on the door
- on the roof

Although we say "in a building", we use "on" for **the different floors**:

- When I lived in Paris, I lived **on the sixth floor** with no elevator.

There are also **some geographic locations** that we **usually** use "on" for.

For example:

- on an island
 - on the coast
 - on a farm
- Note: In some contexts, we can say "at a farm" as well.

We use it for the words "**right**", "**left**" and "**side**".

For example:

- on the left
 - on the side
 - on the right side
 - on the right-hand side
- Note: In some contexts, we can use "at the side" as well.

Example sentences:

- The lamp is **on that table**.
- You have a stain **on your T-shirt**.
- George likes to sleep **on the floor**.
- Frank doesn't really like people, and would prefer to live alone **on an island**.
- Sydney is **on the east coast** of Australia.
- In Australia, we drive **on the left**.
- In other words, we drive **on the right side** of the road.
Note: "Right" can mean the opposite of "left" or "correct".

at

We usually use "at" to indicate **a general location**. The thing or person might be inside the place, or very close to or next to the place.

For example:

- at the library
- at the cinema
- at the bus stop
- at the traffic lights
- at the door (This means on the floor very close to the door.)
- at the window (This means very close to the window, probably on the window sill.)
- at the beach
Note: We can say "on the beach" if we mean on the sand.
- at the park
Note: We can also say "in the park".

We also use "at" for **events**.

For example:

- at a party
- at a concert
- at a wedding
- at a seminar

Sometimes we use "at" **immediately before the place** (without an article or other determiner).

For example:

- at work
- at school
- at college
- at university
- at home

Note: "Home" is a bit special. If you use verbs like "be" or "stay", "at" is optional. So you can say:

- I was **at home** all weekend. Or: I was **home** all weekend.

But if there is an activity, you need "at":

- I used to go to the gym, but now I exercise **at home**.

Example sentences:

- George waited **at the bus stop**.
- Somebody is **at the door**.
- There's a cat **at the window**.
- She stopped **at the traffic lights**.
- Frank got drunk **at the party**.
- They're studying law **at university**.
- I'm **at work** right now.

More Details

Let's now look at some more specific rules.

Buildings - in, at

We use "in" when we are surrounded by something or when we are in an enclosed space. That means that we can use **"in" if we are inside a building.**

BUT we often use "at" for buildings and outdoor places as well.

For example:

- in/at a restaurant
- in/at a supermarket
- in/at a park

Normally, **"at" is more general.** For example, if you say "I'm at the restaurant", it might mean that you are inside, or that you are outside, but very close to the restaurant (you might be in the parking lot). If you say "I'm in the restaurant", it means that you are definitely inside.

We usually use **"in" for things inside a place.**

For example:

- There are 30 tables **in the restaurant.**

BUT we usually use **"at"** if we are talking about where **an event or action** takes place.

For example:

- We had dinner **at the restaurant.**
- George used to work **at a restaurant.**

This rule also applies if we are talking about somebody's home.

For example:

- There are lots of cockroaches **in John's house.**

BUT:

- I do not want to stay **at John's house.**

In some situations we use "in" immediately before the location (without a determiner).

For example:

- in hospital
- in prison/jail

BUT "in hospital" means that the person is a patient. If you say "in the hospital" or "at the hospital", it is not clear. The person might be a patient, but they could also be a visitor or someone who works there.

Compare:

- Did you know that Kate was **in hospital**?

And:

- The doctor works **at the hospital** two days a week.

Similarly, if you say "in prison/jail", it means that the person is being held there. In other words, they are a prisoner. If you say "in the prison/jail" or "at the prison/jail", the person might be a visitor or an employee there.

Compare:

- Frank spent a night **in jail**.

And:

- Frank works **at a jail**.

A similar rule applies to educational institutions (like schools, colleges and universities). If you say "at school", it means that the person is a student there, or possibly a teacher. If you say "at the school", the person might be a visitor or an employee there.

Compare:

- My dad called me when I was **at school** yesterday.

And:

- I work as a gardener **at the school** near the park.

You can also say "in school", but the meaning is a bit different. "In school" means being enrolled or attending as a student. "At school" usually means being physically present there.

Note: Some people use "at school" for both meanings, especially in the UK and Australia.

Like for the general rule for buildings, "in the school" means physically inside the school building.

Compare:

- My daughter's only four years old, so she's not **in school** yet.
- I had a part-time job when I was **in college**.

And:

- There are 25 classrooms **in the school**.

Food and liquids - in

We use "in" to talk about the contents of food or liquids:

- There is a lot of fat **in doughnuts**.
- Are there raw onions **in that salad**?
- There isn't much alcohol **in light beer**.

Islands - in, on

As mentioned above, we use "on" before "island":

- There aren't many people living **on Hamilton Island**.

However, if the name of the island does not have the word "island" in it, we usually use the preposition "in":

- She spent two weeks **in Bali**.

North, south, east and west - in, on

We use "in" if we use "north", "south", "east" or "west" as a noun:

- Tasmania is **in the south**.
- Newcastle is **in the north** of England.

If we use these words as adjectives, we choose the preposition based on the noun:

- Sydney is **on the east coast** of Australia.
- They live **on the west side** of the river.

Transport - in, on

Generally speaking, we use "on" for forms of transport.

For example:

- I'm **on the plane**.
- She met her husband **on a bus**.
- Frank got arrested **on the train**.

We can say "in the plane/bus/train", but we usually only say it if we want to emphasise that the person or thing is inside and not outside.

We also say:

- on a ship
- on a boat

However, if it is a small boat, especially if it is something like a canoe or a rowboat, we usually use "in":

- When I was on the lake **in my boat**, a bird pooped on my head.

We also say:

- on a bicycle/bike
- on a motorbike
- on a horse

The main exception for forms of transport is cars and things that are similar to cars. We say:

- in a car
- in a taxi
- in a van
- in a truck

If you say "on a car", it refers to the outside surface of the car. You might say:

- There were lots of leaves **on my car** because I left it under a tree for several hours.

On the topic of transport, we usually say:

- at the airport
- at the (bus/train) station

Like for the general rule for buildings, "in the airport/station" is also possible, but it means physically inside the building.

Streets, roads, etc. - in, on, at

For streets (and words like "road", "avenue", etc.), we usually use "on":

- There are lots of pubs **on George Street**.

We can also use "in" for streets:

- There are lots of pubs **in George street**.

However, if there is a number before the street name, we use "at":

- There's a good pub **at 110 George Street**.

Water - in, on, at

If the thing or person is surrounded by water, we use "in".

For example:

- I saw Frank swimming **in our neighbour's pool**.
- There are lots of fish **in this river**.
- There is a small island **in the lake**.

However, if the thing or person is on the surface of the water, we usually use "on":

- There are lots of boats **on the lake**.

But we can also say:

- There are lots of boats **in the lake**.

If the thing or person is not in the water, but close to the water, we usually use "at":

- I'm going to have a picnic **at the lake**.

You can also use "at" to speak in general terms, especially if you do not know the exact location or if it is not important.

For example, if someone asked me: "Do you know where George is?"
I could answer: "Yes, he's **at the local pool.**"

I do not know if right now as we speak he is swimming, lying next to the pool or in the parking lot, but I know that he went to the pool.

Printed and digital things - in, on

Usually we use "in" for printed and written things (like pictures and letters), but for some things we use "on".

For example:

- on a map
- on a menu
- on a list
- on a page

If you are talking about a specific page in a book or newspaper, you can say:

- on page (the number)
For example: The picture is **on page 10.**

When we are talking about paper, it depends. If we are talking about information from a newspaper or research paper, we use "in":

- I know it's true because I read it **in the newspaper.**

If we are talking about a physical sheet of paper, we use "on":

- There are marks **on this paper.**

Examples of digital things:

- on a webpage
- on a website
- on the internet
- in an email

- in a document
- in a file

Top, bottom, front, back - in, on, at

For these words, we use “at” when referring to a position or general area.

For example:

- She is **at the top** of the hill.
- We waited **at the bottom** of the stairs.
- He stood **at the front** of the room.
- The dog is **at the back** of the house.

We use “in” when a thing or person is inside an area or part of something.

For example:

- “There’s a crack **in the top** of the table.” (in the material)
- Water collected **in the bottom** of the boat. (in the lower section)
- The kids sat **in the front** of the car. (on the front seats)
- They’re sitting **in the back** of the classroom. (inside the back section)
Note: For rooms, “at the back” is also common.

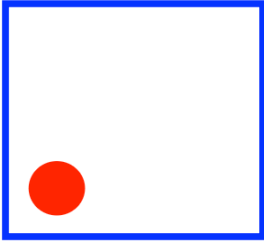
We use “on” when a thing or person is touching or attached to a surface.

For example:

- The book is **on the top** of the cupboard.
- There’s a label **on the bottom** of the box.
- The logo is **on the front** of the shirt.
- There’s a pocket **on the back** of the jacket.

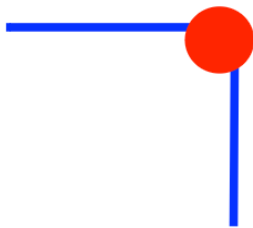
Corners - in, on

Look at these pictures.



in the corner

(Again, there is the idea of being surrounded by something.)



on the corner

Example sentences:

- There is a small table **in the corner** of the room.
- There is a pub **on the corner** of our street.
Note: It is less common, but you can also say "at the corner of our street".