

# Prepositions of Time - In, On, At

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

(summary at the end)

### in

Generally speaking, we use "in" for **periods of time**, including:

parts of the day <sup>1</sup>	Frank often has a nap <b>in the afternoon</b> .
weeks	My birthday is <b>in the first week of March</b> .
months	In Australia, winter starts <b>in June</b> .
seasons	George was born <b>in winter</b> .
years	She was born <b>in 1995</b> .
decades <sup>2</sup>	Shoulder pads were popular <b>in the 1980s</b> .
centuries	Television was invented <b>in the 20<sup>th</sup> century</b> .
historical periods of time	Feudalism existed in Europe <b>in the Middle Ages</b> .

1. For **parts of the day** , we say:

- **in the morning**
- **in the afternoon**
- **in the evening**

BUT:

- **at night**

! We sometimes say "in the night", but the meaning is a bit different and it is much less common. We use it to talk about a specific night if we want to tell a story or add emphasis:

- I woke up **in the night** because I heard a strange noise.
- We stayed awake and then escaped **in the night**.

Note: If you speak Spanish, there is no direct translation for “de madrugada” in English. We typically say “in the early hours of the morning”.

2. We write decades in the following ways: the 1980s (most common), the '80s, the eighties. When speaking, you can say “the nineteen-eighties” or (more informally) “the eighties”.

### Useful tip:

One way to help you remember this is to imagine it visually. For example, we say “I’m swimming in the pool”. We say “in” because we are surrounded by something. In this case we are surrounded by water and the walls of the pool. If you say “in June”, you are, in a way, “surrounded” by that month.

We use “in” for **periods of time that are not as clearly defined** as well. We say “in the past” and “in the future”.

For example:

- If you can believe it, Frank was naughtier **in the past** than he is today.
- **In the future**, we might all have driverless cars.

We also use “in” to talk about **how long we need to do something**.

For example:

- They finished the job **in three months**.  
(That means it took them three months to finish the job.)
- The report took me four hours, but I'm sure I could've done it **in two hours** if I hadn't checked my email every ten minutes.

Finally, we use it to mean **at the end of a period of time to talk about the future**.

For example:

- I'll be at the bar **in half an hour**.  
(That means that if it is now 8:00, I will be at the bar at 8:30.)
- He's going to Sydney **in two weeks**.  
(That means that if today is 1 April, he is going to Sydney around 15 April.)

## on

We use "on" for **days of the week**.

For example:

- Frank got arrested **on Monday**.
- **On Sundays** I often go to the beach.  
Note: We normally use the plural ("Sundays" and not "Sunday") if it is a habit or something that happens regularly.

### Useful tip:

If you forget which preposition to use with days, try to think of "Monday", because "Monday" has **ON** in the middle: **on Monday**.

**!** We also use "on" for **parts of the day if a day of the week comes before it**.

For example:

- I have an appointment **on Monday morning**.
- **on Wednesday afternoon**
- **on Friday evening**
- **on Saturday night**

In spoken and informal English, we often drop the "on" when it is in front of a day. So we can say:

- Frank got arrested **Monday**.
- **Sundays** I often go the beach.
- I have an appointment **Monday morning**.

We use "on" for the **weekend in American and Australian English**:

- Ethel and I went to the mountains **on the weekend**.
- I sometimes have to work **on weekends**.  
Note: Here you can also say "on the weekend" or "weekends".

We also use "on" in front of **dates**.

For example:

- Many people play jokes on their neighbours **on 1 April**.
- I'm having a party **on 23 October**.

! The examples above show how we usually **write dates** in British and Australian English. In American English, we would write:

- **on April 1**
- **on October 23**

You can also use ordinal numbers (UK/Au: 1st April; US: April 1st), but this is less common.

! The way we write dates is **different to how we say them**.

#### **British and Australian English:**

For the examples above, we would say "on the first of April" and "on the twenty-third of October".

#### **American English:**

For the examples above, we would say "on April first" and "on October twenty-third".

We use "on" for **special days and holidays**.

For example:

- My boyfriend broke up with me **on my birthday**.
- We normally have a big lunch **on Christmas Day**.
- I went to a party **on New Year's Eve**.

! We also use "at" for special holidays or festivals, but it is used when we are talking about the **general period**. For example, if you say "I saw Frank at Christmas", that could mean that you saw him on 24, 25 or 26 December, or maybe that you saw him on all of those days.

When we use "on", it is **more specific**. If you say "on Christmas Day", you mean 25 December. If you say "on New Year's Eve", you mean 31 December.

# at

We use "at" for **precise moments of the day, such as clock times.**

For example:

- Many people finish work **at 5pm.**
- Frank finishes work **at 3:30.**
- I got up **at 6 o'clock.**

We also say:

- **at noon**
- **at midday**
- **at night**
- **at midnight**
- **at sunrise**
- **at sunset**
- **at dawn**
- **at dusk**
- **at lunchtime**

Note: In informal language, we often just say "**at lunch**".

We use "at" for **holidays or festivals if they last more than one day.**

For example:

- **at Christmas** (usually considered to be from 24 to 26 December)
- **at Easter**
- **at New Year's** (usually 31 December and 1 January)

We use "at" for the **weekend in British English:**

- I'll see you **at the weekend.**

There are also **a few fixed expressions** that we always use with "at".

For example:

- **at the same time**
- **at the moment**
- **at present**

**!** You CAN say "**in the moment**", but it has a different meaning. We use "in the moment" if there is a focus on the present. A common phrase is "**live in the moment**". "Live in the moment" means to pay special attention to what is happening right now without thinking about the past or the future.

Similarly, you CAN say "**in the present**", but the meaning is different. "In the present" is very similar to "in the moment". For example: You should try to **live in the present**, and not worry so much about the future.

To summarise, "at the moment" and "at present" mean "now", and we use "in the moment" and "in the present" if we are actively focussing on what is currently happening.

## No preposition

When we use words like "last", "next", "every", "this" or "that", we do not use "in", "at" or "on".

For example:

- Ethel went to Sydney **last October**.
- He is starting his new job **next Monday**.
- She goes home **every Christmas**.
- I'm going to a party **this weekend**.

# Beginning, Middle and End - In or At?

“**At the beginning**” means during the **first part of a period of time that is literal and concrete**:

- The character is introduced **at the beginning** of the book.
- **At the beginning** of our relationship, we were madly in love.

“**In the beginning**” is **more general and often used when telling a story**:

- When I moved to London, I was quite lonely **in the beginning**.
- **In the beginning**, we were madly in love, but then things changed.

**!** In practice, most people use “at the beginning” and “in the beginning” interchangeably, so do not worry too much if you mix them up.

We always say “**in the middle**”:

- We’re going to New York **in the middle** of the year.

You can also say “**at the end**” or “**in the end**”, but the meaning is different.

We use “**at the end**” to talk about the **last part of something**.

For example:

- **At the end** of book, the two main characters get married.
- The motorcycle was invented **at the end** of the 19th century.

“**In the end**” is **similar to finally or eventually**.

For example:

- Frank was considering becoming a K-Pop singer, but **in the end** he decided not to.
- We looked everywhere for George and **in the end** we found him in the library.

# Summary

<b>in</b> (mainly for periods)	<b>on</b> (mainly for days and dates)	<b>at</b> (mainly for precise times)
in the morning/afternoon/evening	parts of the day if a day of the week comes before it (e.g. on Monday morning)	clock times (e.g. at 5pm)
in the night ( → specific, used for stories)	days of the week	at night
weeks	on the weekend (US and Au English)	at the weekend (UK English)
months	dates	at noon/midday/midnight
seasons	special days and holidays (e.g. on Christmas Day)	special holidays and festivals that last more than one day (e.g. at Easter, at Christmas)
years		meals (e.g. at lunchtime)
decades		at sunrise/sunset/dawn/dusk
centuries		at the same time
historical periods of time		
in the past/future		
in + amount of time to do something (e.g. They finished the job in three months.)		
in + amount of time from now until a point in the future (e.g. I'm going to Sydney in two weeks.)		
in the moment ( → focus on the present)		at the moment ( = now)
in the present) ( → focus on the present)		at present ( = now)
in the beginning ( → general, used for stories)		at the beginning ( → literal and concrete)
in the middle		
in the end ( = finally, eventually)		at the end ( = in the last part of something)

Note: With words like "last", "next", "every", "this" or "that", we do not use a preposition.

For example: Ethel went to Sydney last October.