Pre-position? Preposterous!

Preface

The goal of my essay is to tackle the age-old rule *never end a sentence with a preposition!* I agree with this to a certain degree, but that’s usually when I hear someone say, “What time are we meeting at?” This not only sounds bad, but also looks sloppy and careless on paper. Before I go any further, I must define the preposition.

A Definition

As defined by *Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, *preposition* has a Latin base and means, “to put in front; a linguistic form that combines with a noun, pronoun, or noun equivalent to form a phrase that typically has an adverbial, adjective, or substantial rational to some other word,” (929). While this definition seems straightforward, I wanted to verify with another dictionary before moving on to usage guides.

*The American Heritage Dictionary* gives a parallel definition to *Webster’s*; however, *American Heritage* provides an essential clue to the prepositional mystery: in the usage note for *preposition*, the note indicates, “John Dryden first promulgated the doctrine that a preposition shouldn’t be used at the end of a sentence, probably on the basis of a specious analogy to Latin,” (1386). Basically what we have is a seventeenth-century stickler taking Latin too far by trying to apply the rules of the Latin language to the English language. I understand Dryden’s wanting to maintain the grammatical rules of the language which underlie English, but let’s be real, this is ridiculous.

Why don’t we encourage double-negative usage like Spanish? American-English, especially, incorporates principles of the “melting-pot,” and we are close enough to Mexico that such an exception would make sense. Why don’t we mandate each verb has to be conjugated six ways, like German, depending on the person being addressed? I mean, the English language *is* based on German and Latin…this makes perfect sense to me. Yes, John Dryden, English has evolved from Latin and German, but *evolved* is the key word here. English *is not* Latin and therefore has its own rules. In fact, “English syntax allows for the final placement of the preposition,” (*American Heritage* 1386).
“Prepositional Words” Don’t Always Function as Prepositions

In every grammar book I’ve flipped through, the section on prepositions—like any other grammatical topic, e.g., a verb, adverbs, adjectives, etc., provides examples, even lists of words that function as prepositions. The problem with listing prepositions in this manner is that children and adults will become used to associating these words only as prepositions.

The Scribner Handbook for Writers provides one of these lists, in which a table of prepositions includes about, above, across, after, before, below, beneath, beyond, for, in, inside, into, like, on, off, past, since, through, till, toward, under, upon, and with (DiYanni, Hoy 289). If it weren’t for the authors’ following examples of prepositions used as adverbs or verbs, one would assume these words should never end a sentence. Here’s another grammatical problem with prepositional words, the assumption that these particular words are limited by the adjective “prepositional.”

Karen Elizabeth Gordon says it best in The Deluxe Transitive Vampire, “Every word is inherently at least one part of speech—its potential in life—and can often act the role of three or four different parts of speech by its behavior in a given stance,” (Gordon 9). Prepositional “words” are no exception to this conclusion, though Gordon doesn’t deliberately show examples with prepositions, she uses the word fancy in a few different contexts to prove the versatility of a single word.

Traditionally, people would initially assume fancy is an adjective because we are used to seeing it in contexts like “her fancy shoes were perfect for the occasion.” Gordon uses fancy as a verb, “I fancy dames with broad shoulders,” and as a noun, “I therefore took a fancy to her,” (Gordon 9). In short, “prepositional words,” like any other words, serve other purposes besides prepositions.

Prepositions as Adverbs

In Rebecca Elliot’s Painless Grammar, Elliot distinguishes between the preposition and the double verb. Examples of prepositions include to, away, from, and in. Examples of double verbs (that is, the verb ends in an adverb, which looks like a preposition but is not) include to sleep over, to wake up, to throw up, and to shut down (Elliot 56). As a double verb, “prepositional words” are actually adverbs modifying the verb. That being said, the phrase “to shut down” is quite different from the phrase “to shut up,” one meaning to fail, the other to be
quiet. If one were to rearrange these phrases, it would not make sense. Elliot does, however, recommend not ending a sentence with a preposition (a true preposition), but if rearranging the sentence makes it sound awkward or weird, don’t do it (Elliot 56).

The awkward wording is the real trouble with avoiding ending a sentence with a preposition. Winston Churchill demonstrated this awkwardness when he objected John Dryden’s rule by saying, “This is the sort of English up with which I cannot put,” (American Heritage 1386). Furthermore, sentences ending with adverbs are frequently mistaken as prepositions. If you ungrammatically complete the sentence “It’s the most curious book I’ve ever run across,” with “It’s the most curious book across which I have ever ran,” (American Heritage 1386), then have merely added an error. American Heritage points out that ending a sentence with an adverb has never been incorrect (1386).

Even The Chicago Manual of Style agrees that “Some words that function as prepositions may also function as other parts of speech,” and the “distinguishing feature of a preposition is that is always has an object,” (Chicago Manual of Style 189). While this may sound repetitive of other grammar handbooks, Chicago provides two clear examples of the word down functioning as a preposition and an adverb. In the sentence “let’s slide down the hill,” down is a preposition because it takes the object “the hill.” In the sentence, “We sat down,” down does not take an object, but rather modifies the verb “sat” and is therefore an adverb.

**Strategically Misplaced Prepositions**

I was expecting Strunk and White to be promoters of eliminating terminal prepositions in The Elements of Style, but much to my surprise, they were even befuddled by this rule, “Not only is the preposition acceptable at the end, sometimes it is more effective in that spot than anywhere else,” (Strunk and White 77). As far as effective writing goes, Strunk and White point out that, “A claw hammer, not an ax, was the tool he murdered her with,” sounds much more violent than the proper, “A claw hammer, not an ax, was the tool with which he murdered her,” (Strunk and White 77).

The Scribner Handbook for Writers even agrees that sometimes the informal use of prepositions at the end of a sentence sounds better than the formal. When asking “Who are you talking about?” this syntax sounds less stiff than “About whom are you talking?” (DiYanni and Hoy 291). It appears that usually “prepositions” at the end of sentences are actually “adverbs,”
but occasionally true prepositions are placed at the end of sentences depending on the effect the writer wants to have on the reader.

**Terminal Prepositions: A Myth**

The rule *never end a sentence with a preposition* is evidently invalid. John Dryden proposed the rule in the 1600s and, despite having little support, the rule has been continually preached in schools since. I’m beginning to realize this rule is as effective as “I before E except after C,” and except in neighbor, caffeine, seeing, their, beige, weird, heifer, etc. The rule has failed to address the many forms “prepositional words” can take and has left us with large charts of words that seemingly function purely as prepositions. That being said, I will end my sentences however I like.
Works Cited


Definition: A definition is a statement giving the meaning of a word or expression, especially in a dictionary. There is no general agreement on a standard definition of intelligence. A nice meal with friends is my definition of a good time. By definition. 2. Uncountable noun. Definition is the quality of being clear and distinct. Give your brows extra definition with eyebrow pencil. The speakers criticised his new programme for lack of definition.