



Prepositional phrases as adjectives: Prepositional phrases that modify nouns or pronouns are placed immediately after the noun or pronoun they modify. Otherwise, the phrase will be understood to modify the verb. Think through the logic of the following sentence: *In the ocean the whale dived toward the fish in the school*; the phrase *in the ocean* modifies *dived*. In “Hokku Poems,” Richard Wright wrote, “With a twitching nose / A dog reads a telegram / On a wet tree trunk.”

In the ocean the whale dived toward the fish in the school.
With a twitching nose / A dog reads a telegram / On a wet tree trunk.

These sentences are typical. The introductory prepositional phrase modifies the verb and so acts as an adverb, and the prepositional phrase following a noun modifies the noun. There are cases in which a prepositional phrase follows a noun but still modifies the verb anyway, so be alert to that possibility:

Gollum bit Sam with surprising force.

Punctuating prepositional phrases: We generally do not put a comma after a single short introductory prepositional phrase, but we do put a comma after a long (usually more than four words) introductory prepositional phrase or after multiple introductory prepositional phrases. We always put a comma if not doing so would be misleading.

From the beginning Caesar trusted Brutus.
As Rome’s true leader, Caesar was ingenious.
From the start of his political career, Caesar trusted Brutus.

Avoid splitting the subject and verb: The clearest sentences often have the verb next to the subject, so it often is advisable to avoid putting a prepositional phrase between the two. A prepositional phrase that intervenes between subject and verb usually results in a subject/verb disagreement, in which the verb agrees with the object of preposition instead of the subject.

Wrong: The group of ancient columns were vandalized.
Right: The group of ancient columns was vandalized.
Better: Barbarians vandalized the ancient columns.