



Teaching Grammar: Learning Prepositions With Corpora

by [Anastasiia Kryzhanivska](#)

Even though teachers often provide students with answers to certain grammar exercises, it does not guarantee that learners will really remember or understand them. Most of the time, discovery exercises—that is, when students need to research a topic themselves and report back—turn out to be more effective than answer keys provided by teachers. This lesson allows students to examine an online corpus that they can use both in and outside the classroom in case they doubt the grammatical correctness of their writing. Because it does not provide direct answers to questions, students have the opportunity to practice their analytical skills by interpreting the results of their searches.

Levels: Intermediate+

Aims

- Develop students' ability to make appropriate preposition choices in writing.
- Encourage students to analyze language in use.
- Assist students in discovering answers instead of providing them with answers.

Class Time: 45 minutes

Preparation Time: 15 minutes (if you want to prepare your own grammar exercise) or none (if you use the Appendix)

Resources Needed: Computer lab or students' own laptops, internet access, handout

Procedure

1. Divide students in groups or pairs and ask them to complete a grammar exercise. A sample grammar exercise is provided in the Appendix.
2. After everyone is done, instead of providing students with the correct answers in class, encourage them to find the correct answers themselves.
3. Invite students to visit the [Corpus of Contemporary American English](#) (COCA; Davies, 2008).
4. Familiarize students with the corpus first (if necessary) by explaining that it is a freely available collection of English texts which currently totals more than 560 million words. The corpus is regularly updated and expanded.

5. Walk students through the first question on the worksheet by inviting them to enter the first target word from the exercise (i.e., *grateful*) into the search bar (see Figure 1).

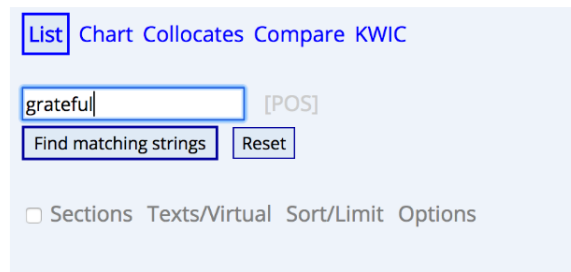


Figure 1. COCA search for *grateful*. (Davies, 2008)

6. Ask students to click on the grayed “[POS]” option, which stands for part of speech, and ask students to select “prep.ALL”, the tag used for prepositions, as shown in Figure 2.

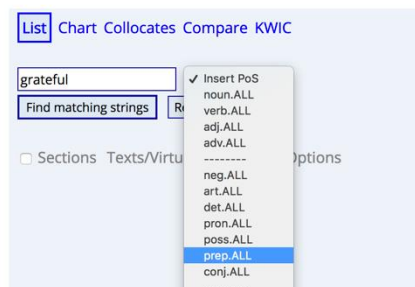


Figure 2. Part-of-speech drop-down menu in the COCA. (Davies, 2008)

7. Clarify that the system will add a code to the search bar in order to search for prepositions used immediately after *grateful*. Students must ensure that there is a space between *grateful* and the code (see Figure 3).

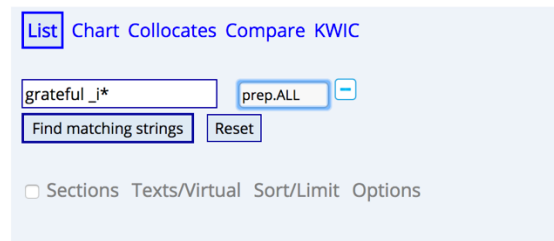


Figure 3. COCA search for *grateful* followed by a preposition. (Davies, 2008)

8. Ask students to click on “Find matching strings” to find out the most commonly used prepositions after *grateful* (see Figure 4).

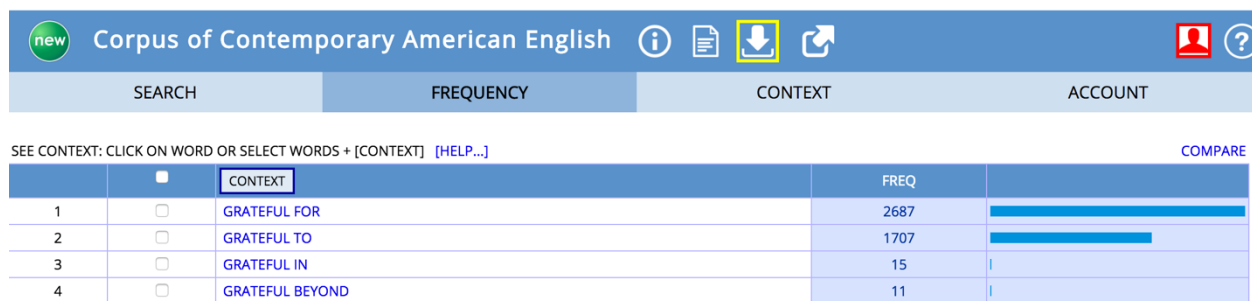


Figure 4. COCA results for prepositions after *grateful*. (Davies, 2008)

9. Ask students to click on the results under the “Context” column (see Figure 4) to investigate the difference between the first two combinations. Students should notice that *grateful for* is used to describe something a person is happy about or thankful for. It is something a person has received from somebody else, for example, *grateful for the time*, *grateful for their donations*, *grateful for the break*, etc. The combination *grateful to* is mostly used to indicate appreciation to a person who did something for someone else. For example, *grateful to the people*, *grateful to all of them*, *grateful to you*, *grateful to him*, and so on.
10. As a class, choose the option that works best for the sentence in the exercise. Because the person is happy about contributions made by their advisor, the correct answer is the collocation *grateful for*. Students should be able to come to this conclusion themselves.
11. Complete one or two more items from the worksheet together with the students.
12. Ask students to check their answers using the search results from COCA for every sentence in the exercise (included at the end of the Appendix).

Options

- The COCA could be used instead of an answer key for almost any grammar exercise: use of gerunds (*eating*, *attending*, *driving*, etc.), subject-verb agreement (*she goes*, *I go*, etc.), verb forms/tenses (*went vs. has/have gone*, etc.), and count and noncount nouns (*rice vs. a bowl of rice*, *water vs. a cup of water*, etc.) to cite a few examples.
- After students have a chance to work with the COCA in class, a similar activity could be assigned as homework.
- Encourage students to create an account on the COCA website. Even though it is free of charge, it allows no more than 10–15 searches without registration.

Conclusion

Data-driven answers to grammar exercises like this allow students to become more independent language learners and teach them how to use a corpus tool to improve their grammatical accuracy.

References

Davies, M. (2008). The corpus of contemporary American English (COCA). Retrieved December 26, 2021, from <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>

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Appendix: Example Grammar Exercise

Use of Prepositions in Collocations

Fill in each blank space with an appropriate preposition. There may be more than one possibility in some cases.

1. The student is very grateful _____ contributions of his advisor.
2. The researchers planned _____ using this method.
3. I admire my professor _____ his support.
4. We would like to ask _____ a deadline extension.
5. My colleagues and I are applying _____ the presidential grant.
6. The researchers devoted five years _____ investigating this issue.
7. Smith is opposed _____ the suggestion from us.
8. Our results are different _____ results obtained in previous research.
9. This class is a prerequisite _____ the class I'll be required to take next semester.
10. We can infer _____ this evidence that inflation is inevitable.
11. The student is nervous _____ their conference presentation.
12. Our organization is associated _____ the university.
13. Researchers are familiar _____ this procedure.
14. Undergraduate students are not yet accustomed _____ using that equipment.
15. We look forward _____ the next step of our experiment.

Use of Prepositions in Collocations

Answer Key

1. The student is very grateful **for** contributions of his advisor.
2. The researchers planned **on** using this method.
3. I admire my professor **for** his support.
4. We would like to ask **for** a deadline extension.
5. My colleagues and I are applying **for** the presidential grant.
6. The researchers devoted five years **to** investigating this issue.
7. Smith is opposed **to** the suggestion from us.
8. Our results are different **from** results obtained in previous research.
9. This class is a prerequisite **to** the class I'll be required to take next semester.
10. We can infer **from** this evidence that inflation is inevitable.
11. The student is nervous **about** their conference presentation.
12. Our organization is associated **with** the university.
13. Researchers are familiar **with** this procedure.
14. Undergraduate students are not yet accustomed **to** using that equipment.
15. We look forward **to** the next step of our experiment.