Phrasal Verbs and Prepositions

“The Patriarch Joseph, after agreeing with the Latins that their formula of the Holy Ghost proceeding from the Son meant the same as the Greek formula of the Holy Ghost proceeding through the Son, fell ill and died. An unkind scholar remarked that after muddling his prepositions what else could he decently do?”

- Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople 1453*

Some verbs in English must be followed by a specific preposition. Others change meaning when combined with different prepositions. Because these verbs rely on prepositions for their meaning, writers need to use a proper verb-preposition combination to communicate clearly. “I brought cake from the party” means the opposite of “I brought cake to the party,” and “I brought cake the party” is nonsensical. Below are some of the most common verb-preposition combinations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb/Sentence</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>account for</td>
<td>I can’t account for Sarah’s actions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>accuse [someone] of</td>
<td>James accused her of stealing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(dis)agree on</td>
<td>They disagree on the definition of theft.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(dis)agree with</td>
<td>Honestly? I agree with him.</td>
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<td>allude to</td>
<td>He alluded to her shady past.</td>
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<td>apologize for</td>
<td>He apologized for involving me in the dispute.</td>
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<tr>
<td>apologize to</td>
<td>Sarah did not apologize to me.</td>
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<td>apply for</td>
<td>She had applied for a passport two months ago.</td>
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<td>argue with</td>
<td>They argued with each other constantly.</td>
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<td>argue about</td>
<td>They argued about lots of things.</td>
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<tr>
<td>argue that</td>
<td>Sarah argued that James did not love her.</td>
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<td>arrive at</td>
<td>She explained how she arrived at that conclusion.</td>
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<td>ask [someone] for</td>
<td>I asked James for his honest opinion.</td>
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<td>become of</td>
<td>Who knows what will become of their marriage.</td>
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<td>believe in</td>
<td>I don’t believe in happy endings anymore.</td>
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<td>belong to</td>
<td>Sarah said the jewels rightfully belonged to her.</td>
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<td>blame [someone] for</td>
<td>Sarah blames James for the broken window.</td>
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<td>blame [something] on</td>
<td>He blames the damage on her.</td>
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<td>borrow from</td>
<td>James had borrowed from her in the past.</td>
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<td>care for</td>
<td>Sarah says he never cared for her.</td>
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<td>come from</td>
<td>She comes from a broken home.</td>
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<td>compare to</td>
<td>This situation can’t be compared to past disputes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>complain about</td>
<td>James complains about it constantly.</td>
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<td>compliment [someone] on</td>
<td>I complimented Sarah on her grace under pressure.</td>
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<td>congratulate [someone] on</td>
<td>Her lawyer congratulated her on not giving in.</td>
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<td>consent to</td>
<td>She did not consent to a police search.</td>
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<td>consist of</td>
<td>The physical evidence consists of broken glass.</td>
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<td>convince [someone] of</td>
<td>It will be hard to convince the jurors of her guilt.</td>
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<td>decide between</td>
<td>They will have to decide between the two stories.</td>
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<td>delight in</td>
<td>James seems to delight in her anxiety.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
depend on/upon
Everything depends on the jury’s decision.

detract from
James’s arrogance detracts from his appeal.
dream of/about
Last night, I dreamt about Sarah.
explain [something] to
I didn’t explain my premonition to anyone.
happen to
I don’t want anything bad to happen to her.
hear of
I’ve never heard of a case like this.
hear about
Yesterday, the jury heard about it from James.
hear from
Today, we will hear from Sarah.
insist on
She still insists on her innocence.
invite [someone] to
The judge invited Sarah to tell her side of the story.

laugh about
It’s hard to laugh about the situation now.
laugh at
James laughed at Sarah’s defense.
laugh with
We did not laugh with him.
listen for
Breathlessly, we listened for the verdict.
look at
The judge looked at them.
look for
I looked for Sarah in the hallway afterwards.
object to
James, obviously, objected to the verdict.
prefer [something] to
The jury preferred Sarah’s version of events to his.
plan on
Sarah plans on leaving him.

Some prepositions also take the form of two or three word phrases that don’t include a verb. These are known as “phrasal” prepositions. The most common are:

according to
According to the doctor, my condition is very rare.
across from
Would you prefer to sit across from me?
apart/aside from
Aside from some minor symptoms, I feel fine.
because of
People judge me because of media stereotypes.
by virtue of
But I am harmless by virtue of my upbringing.
due to
Those one or two accidents were due to negligence.
except for
Except for those incidents, I’ve never hurt anyone.
for the sake of
I tell you this for the sake of honesty.
in back/front of
Whoops, I didn’t mean to do that in front of you.
in addition to
I do crave other things in addition to red meat.
in spite of
I have an active dating life in spite of my condition.
instead of
Instead of the movie, let’s go for a walk in the park.
on account of
It will be romantic on account of the full moon.
on top of
It looks nice and private on top of that lonely hill.
out of
What do you mean we’re out of time?
regardless of
I would stay regardless of my work schedule.
short of
You’re short of sleep; I get it.
up to
Shall we meet again? It’s up to you.