SPOTTING THE ERRORS

PREPOSITION

A Self-Help Booklet for AFCAT Aspirants

Discovery-Based Learning · Worked Examples · Self-Assessment

What's inside this booklet

- Step up for Success — your motivation and target learning goals
- How Do Spotting-Errors Questions on Preposition Look? — 10 solved examples
- What Do You Understand by Preposition? — a discovery-based lesson
- Would You Assess Yourself as You Learn? — 2 sets of 15 practice questions
- Check Your Target Learning Performance — answers & explanations

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Step up for Success

Dear AFCAT Aspirants,

Welcome aboard! Prepositions are tiny words, but they quietly decide whether a sentence sounds polished or gives itself away as an error. The good news: preposition mistakes follow patterns, not surprises — a handful of confusable pairs (in/at, since/for, between/among, and their cousins) account for most of the marks in this section. By the end of this booklet, you will spot these patterns instantly, understand why an option is wrong, and answer calmly and correctly — without translating the rule in your head first.

Remember: **accuracy first, speed second.** Read slowly today, and race tomorrow. Let's begin!

Your target learning goals for this booklet

- ✓ Recognise preposition errors on sight, without silently translating the rule.
- ✓ Understand why an option is wrong — not just which option is wrong.
- ✓ Master the confusable preposition-pairs tested most often in AFCAT Verbal Ability.
- ✓ Self-check your progress with two full practice sets before test day.

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How Do Spotting-Errors Questions on Conjunction Look?

Every question in this section gives you one sentence, broken into three underlined parts — (a), (b) and (c). One of these parts may carry a preposition error. If the sentence is completely correct, you choose (d), 'No error'. Here are ten fresh, exam-style examples to warm up your eye before we go into the concept notes.

Q1. Without a moment's hesitation, the recruit dived in **(a)**/ the muddy trench **(b)**/ to retrieve his rifle. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q2. He was born **(a)**/ at Lucknow **(b)**/ but grew up in a small village near Kanpur. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q3. Three centuries before **(a)**/ this fort was raised on the hilltop **(b)**/ to guard the ancient trade route. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q4. A narrow footbridge runs **(a)**/ under the ravine **(b)**/ linking the two hillside villages. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q5. The convoy reached the border post **(a)**/ in good time **(b)**/ well before the scheduled inspection. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q6. The new training manual **(a)**/ is completely different **(b)**/ than the one we used last year. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q7. During the briefing, the colonel calmly advised **(a)**/ to the young cadets **(b)**/ to remain alert throughout the night patrol. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q8. He has been posted here **(a)**/ since three years **(b)**/ and has never once complained about the isolation. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q9. When the ceasefire was declared, **(a)**/ the small piece of disputed territory **(b)**/ was shared between the three neighbouring states. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q10. She got married with a naval officer **(a)**/ and moved to Kochi **(b)**/ soon after the wedding. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Answers & Explanations

Q	Ans	Explanation
1	(a)	Correction: “dived into the muddy trench”. Diving is an act of motion into an enclosed space, so it needs ‘into’, not the resting preposition ‘in’.
2	(b)	Correction: “in Lucknow”. ‘In’ is used for bigger places such as cities and countries; ‘at’ suits smaller, specific points within them.
3	(a)	Correction: “Three centuries ago”. ‘Ago’ measures back from the present moment; ‘before’ shows precedence between two past events.
4	(b)	Correction: “over the ravine”. A bridge passes above and across, carrying a sense of movement/covering — that is ‘over’, not ‘under’.
5	(d)	No error. ‘In good time’ correctly means ‘with a comfortable margin before the deadline’.

6	**(c)**	Correction: “different from the one”. In standard usage, ‘different’ is followed by ‘from’, not ‘than’.
7	**(b)**	Correction: “advised the young cadets”. The preposition ‘to’ is dropped after verbs of communication such as advise, tell, ask, order, request.
8	**(b)**	Correction: “for three years”. ‘Since’ marks a fixed point in time; ‘for’ measures a stretch of duration.
9	**(c)**	Correction: “among the three neighbouring states”. ‘Between’ is reserved for two; ‘among’ is used for more than two.
10	**(a)**	Correction: “married to a naval officer”. The fixed collocation is ‘married to’, never ‘married with’.

What Do You Understand by Conjunction?

Before we hand you a single rule, we want you to find it yourself. Read each short example, sit with the ‘Can You Spot the Pattern?’ question for a moment, and only then look at the ‘Rule Unlocked’ box. Grammar you discover sticks far longer than grammar you're told.

Let's begin with a mystery

Can You Spot the Pattern?

Read these two word-groups aloud:
“The soldier stood the gate.”
“The soldier stood at the gate.”
Only one of these tells you exactly where the soldier was standing. Which one — and what single word supplies that missing link?

You probably noticed it at once: the word ‘at’. Without it, ‘the gate’ is just floating beside ‘stood’ with no stated connection — near it? beside it? facing it? Add ‘at’, and the relationship between the soldier and the gate becomes precise. That small linking job — showing how a noun or pronoun relates to another word in the sentence — is exactly what a preposition does.

Rule Unlocked

A preposition is a word placed before a noun or pronoun to show its relationship — of place, time, direction, manner, or cause — with some other word in the sentence.

The Preposition Family

Can You Spot the Pattern?

Look at these three sentences and ask: what kind of relationship is each highlighted word showing?
(i) The medals are kept in the almirah. (ii) The parade begins at 6 am. (iii) The letter was written with a pen.

In (i), 'in' tells us where something is — a relationship of place. In (ii), 'at' tells us when something happens — a relationship of time. In (iii), 'with' tells us how the action was carried out — a relationship of means. Prepositions keep doing this same linking job, but the flavour of the relationship changes with the words around them.

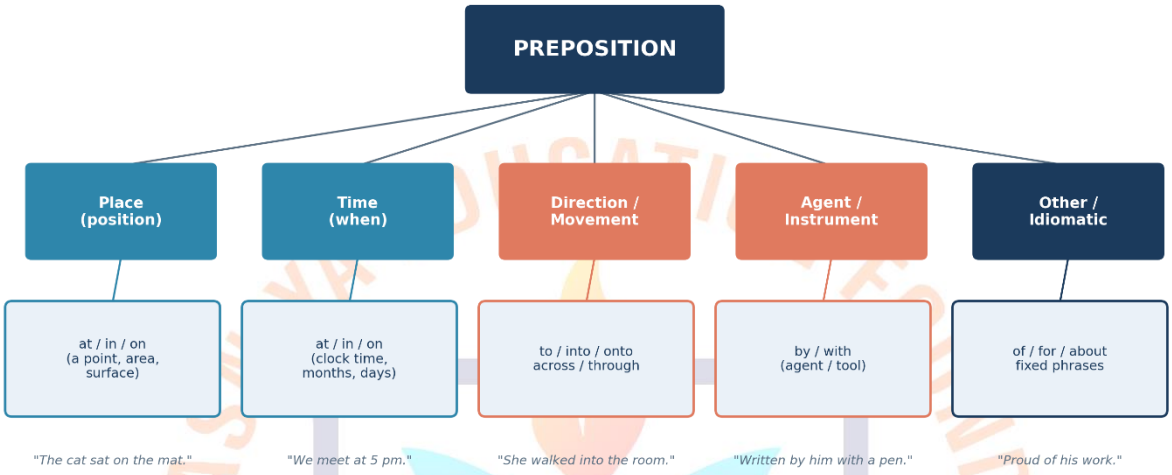

Figure 1: The Preposition family — grouped by the relationship each type of preposition signals.

In vs At vs On — how big is the place?

Can You Spot the Pattern?

Compare: 'I live at Shastri Nagar' and 'I live in Meerut' — both are correct in the very same sentence. Why does the preposition change even though both are 'places'?

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It comes down to size and shape. 'In' suits a large, enclosing area — a city, state, or country (in Meerut, in Rajasthan). 'At' suits a smaller, specific point — a locality, address, or building (at Shastri Nagar, at the bus stop). 'On', meanwhile, is reserved for a surface you can touch — a table, a road, a wall (on the highway, on the noticeboard).

Rule Unlocked

Use 'in' for bigger, enclosing places; 'at' for smaller, specific points; 'on' for a surface. Zoom out for 'in', zoom in for 'at'.

✗ Notice This	✓ Now This
He lives at Chandigarh with his family.	He lives in Chandigarh with his family.

Why: *Chandigarh is a city — a large, enclosing place — so it takes 'in', not the pinpoint preposition 'at'.*

In vs Into, On vs Upon — rest or motion?

Can You Spot the Pattern?

'He is in the office.' vs 'He walked into the office.' — the office hasn't changed. So what has?

The verb has changed from a state of rest to an act of motion — and the preposition follows that shift. 'In' and 'on' describe things already at rest inside or upon something; 'into' and 'upon' describe movement that ends there. A snake crawls into a hole (movement); once inside, it is in the hole (rest). A cat pounces upon a mouse (movement); once caught, the mouse is on the ground (rest).

Rule Unlocked

'In' / 'on' = position at rest. 'Into' / 'upon' = motion that ends at that point.

With vs By — the tool or the doer?

Can You Spot the Pattern?

'The letter was written by him with his pen.' Two prepositions, two very different jobs — can you tell which is which?

'By' introduces the doer of the action — the agent (written by him). 'With' introduces the tool used to do it — the instrument (written with his pen). Mixing them up is a classic, easy-to-miss slip: 'the music was generated with a guitar' sounds fine, but 'the murder was committed with him' accidentally turns the person into a weapon.

Rule Unlocked

'By' names the agent (the person acting); 'with' names the instrument (the thing used).

Above/Below vs Over/Under — position or covering?

Can You Spot the Pattern?

'The sky is above us' and 'A wire is passing above the building' both use 'above'. But could you say 'a wire is passing over the building' too? What extra sense would 'over' add that 'above' doesn't?

'Above' and 'below' simply mark position — one thing is higher or lower than another, full stop. 'Over' and 'under' can mark the same position, but they also carry an extra sense of covering, spanning, or movement — a bridge running over a river doesn't just sit higher than the river, it spans and crosses it. That is why we live below the roof (position) but a bird flies over the pond (movement across), and why a wire passes above the building (position) rather than draping over it.

Rule Unlocked

'Above'/'below' = pure position. 'Over'/'under' = position PLUS a sense of covering, spanning, or movement.

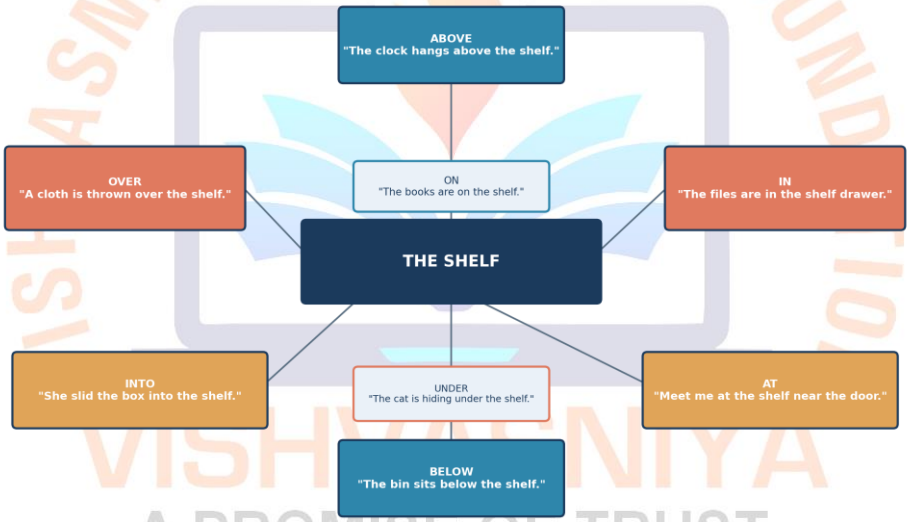

Figure 2: Eight place-prepositions mapped around a single reference object — notice how the choice depends on contact, enclosure, and motion, not just height.

Since / For / From — pinning down time

Can You Spot the Pattern?

'I haven't done anything since yesterday' and 'I have been practising for ten days' — both describe an unfinished stretch of time. So why does one take 'since' and the other 'for'?

'Since' anchors to a fixed starting point on the clock or calendar — since Monday, since 2015, since yesterday. 'For' simply measures a stretch of duration, without naming when it began — for ten days, for three years. 'From' also names a starting point, but pairs with tenses other than the perfect — I shall start work from July — while 'since' is almost always accompanied by a perfect-tense verb.

Rule Unlocked

'Since' = a fixed point + perfect tense. 'For' = a duration. 'From' = a starting point with non-perfect tenses.

✗ Notice This	✓ Now This
He has been posted here since three years.	He has been posted here for three years.

Why: *'Three years' is a duration, not a fixed calendar point, so it must be introduced by 'for', not 'since'.*

Between vs Among, Beside vs Besides

Can You Spot the Pattern?

'Between the two of you, who is stronger?' vs 'The sweets were distributed among ten friends.' What decides the choice here — meaning, or something more countable?

It's genuinely about the count. 'Between' belongs with exactly two people or things; the moment a third joins in, English switches to 'among'. A completely different pair often gets confused for a similar reason: 'beside' means physically next to (sitting beside him), while 'besides' means in addition to (besides eating, he was also reading) — one is about location, the other about extra items on a list.

Rule Unlocked

'Between' = exactly two. 'Among' = more than two. 'Beside' = next to. 'Besides' = in addition to.

✗ Notice This	✓ Now This
The old estate was divided between the four brothers.	The old estate was divided among the four brothers.

Why: *Four brothers are involved, not two, so the sentence needs 'among', not 'between'.*

The verbs that refuse a preposition

Can You Spot the Pattern?

'He resembles his father.' or 'He resembles to his father' — which sounds right to a fluent ear, and why might the second one feel tempting to an Indian-English speaker?

The first is correct — 'resemble' is already transitive; it reaches directly for its object without any linking word. A whole family of verbs behaves this way: order, request, reach, attack, resemble, emphasise, accompany, discuss, investigate, comprise, enter (a place), flee, join, affect, and board. Adding 'to', 'on', 'into', or 'with' after any of these is one of the commonest

traps in this section, precisely because a preposition sounds instinctively 'more polite' in Indian English.

Rule Unlocked

No preposition after: order, request, reach, attack, resemble, emphasise, accompany, discuss, investigate, comprise, enter, flee, join, affect, board.

✗ Notice This	✓ Now This
The teacher emphasised on discipline.	The teacher emphasised discipline.

Why: *'Emphasise' is transitive and takes its object directly — no preposition is needed (though the noun form 'emphasis' does take 'on').*

Dropping 'to' after verbs of communication

Can You Spot the Pattern?

'I advised him to study hard' vs 'I advised to him to study hard' — the second version adds one small word. What does that extra 'to' actually break?

After verbs of communication — advise, tell, ask, beg, command, encourage, request, inform, order — the person being addressed follows the verb directly, with no preposition in between. The infinitive 'to study' that comes later is a completely separate 'to', doing a different job (introducing the action), so it should never be confused with — or duplicated by — a preposition placed right after the verb.

Rule Unlocked

Omit 'to' immediately after: advise, tell, ask, beg, command, encourage, request, inform, order.

Till/Until, Till/Upto, and Within/In

Can You Spot the Pattern?

'We shall work till sunset.' and 'Until 30, he was a bachelor.' — why can't the first sentence begin with 'Until we shall work', but the second one can start with 'Until'?

'Till' and 'until' mean nearly the same thing (up to a particular time), but only 'until' is used to open a sentence. A related pair, 'till' and 'upto', splits along a different line: 'till' is for time (till 5 pm), 'upto' for place or quantity (upto the station). And a third pair often confused with these — 'within' and 'in' — actually differ in precision: 'within five minutes' means at some point before the five minutes end, while 'in five minutes' means exactly when the five minutes are up.

Rule Unlocked

Only ‘until’ opens a sentence. ‘Till’ = time, ‘upto’ = place. ‘Within’ = before the deadline, ‘in’ = exactly at the deadline.

✗ Notice This	✓ Now This
Till 30, he was a bachelor.	Until 30, he was a bachelor.
Why: *‘Till’ cannot open a sentence — only ‘until’ is permitted in that position, even though the two words are otherwise near-synonyms.*	

One preposition, two words — a hidden trap

Can You Spot the Pattern?

‘It is different and inferior to the other.’ — this reads smoothly, yet something is quietly wrong. Can you find it?

‘Different’ needs ‘from’, while ‘inferior’ needs ‘to’ — two separate words, two separate prepositions. The sentence above silently borrows ‘to’ for both, which only actually fits ‘inferior’. The same preposition may be shared across two words only when it genuinely suits both of them; otherwise, each word must get its own.

Rule Unlocked

Never let one preposition serve two words unless it is grammatically correct for both. Spell out each preposition separately when the words disagree.

✗ Notice This	✓ Now This
Her dress does not add but detract from her appearance.	Her dress does not add to but detracts from her appearance.
Why: *‘Add’ needs ‘to’ and ‘detract’ needs ‘from’ — sharing just ‘from’ between them silently breaks ‘add’.*	

Would You Assess Yourself as You Learn?

Time to test the patterns you've just discovered. Below are two independent sets of fifteen questions each, written at a more demanding, C1-level of difficulty — expect formal register, fixed dependent-preposition collocations, and subtler traps than the warm-up set. Attempt each set exactly like the real exam: no peeking at the answers until you've marked every one of the thirty.

Set 1 — Errors of Preposition

Q1. The committee's recommendations **(a)**/ are subject with **(b)**/ the final approval of the board. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q2. Every officer posted here **(a)**/ must comply to the standing orders **(b)**/ issued by headquarters. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q3. He remained strangely indifferent about **(a)**/ the criticism levelled **(b)**/ against his leadership style. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q4. Many border villages were deprived **(a)**/ off basic amenities **(b)**/ for nearly two decades. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q5. Senior citizens above eighty **(a)**/ are exempted from **(b)**/ standing in the queue during elections. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q6. The union insisted **(a)**/ for a written assurance **(b)**/ before calling off the strike. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q7. The young lieutenant was eager **(a)**/ to embark in a career **(b)**/ that promised both adventure and discipline. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q8. Having survived the epidemic once, **(a)**/ the villagers believed themselves immune of **(b)**/ any further outbreak. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q9. The entire battalion **(a)**/ congratulated the young captain on **(b)**/ his well-deserved promotion. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q10. Despite years of training, **(a)**/ he still doubts himself **(b)**/ capable to lead an entire company. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q11. The old estate could not be divided **(a)**/ between the four claimants **(b)**/ without a lengthy court battle. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q12. The officer's promotion **(a)**/ will be finalised within **(b)**/ exactly five working days, no sooner and no later. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q13. Till the results are declared, **(a)**/ no candidate should discuss **(b)**/ the matter with the press. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q14. It is different **(a)**/ from and, in some respects, inferior to **(b)**/ the earlier model it replaced. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q15. Recruits are taught **(a)**/ to walk through a plank **(b)**/ and pass across a narrow tunnel during the obstacle course. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

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Set 2 — Errors of Preposition

Q1. Officers who are prone **(a)**/ for complacency **(b)**/ often falter during real operations. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q2. The recruits were told **(a)**/ to refrain from discuss **(b)**/ operational details outside the mess. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q3. A disciplined soldier always adheres **(a)**/ on the code of conduct **(b)**/ laid down by the service rules. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q4. When negotiations failed, **(a)**/ the district administration was forced to resort **(b)**/ into stricter measures to control the crowd. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q5. Exhausted and demoralised, **(a)**/ the smaller garrison eventually succumbed **(b)**/ to the prolonged siege. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q6. Wholly oblivious about **(a)**/ the danger lurking nearby, **(b)**/ the young sentry lowered his guard. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q7. The commanding officer later apologised **(a)**/ for the confusion **(b)**/ caused during the briefing. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q8. The inquiry committee blamed **(a)**/ the delay to poor coordination **(b)**/ between the two departments concerned. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q9. The soldier was accused **(a)**/ for dereliction of duty **(b)**/ after failing to report the breach in time. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q10. Frontline units benefited greatly **(a)**/ from the improved supply chain **(b)**/ introduced last year. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q11. Many recruits initially suffer **(a)**/ with homesickness **(b)**/ before adjusting to the rigours of academy life. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q12. The battalion's youngest officer **(a)**/ aspires for commanding **(b)**/ his own regiment before he turns forty. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q13. His seniors often accuse him **(a)**/ of dwelling too much **(b)**/ in minor procedural lapses instead of the larger mission. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q14. Being one year senior **(a)**/ than his course-mate, **(b)**/ he was given charge of the platoon first. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

Q15. Prior **(a)**/ to joining the academy, **(b)**/ he had already completed a degree in engineering. **(c)**/ No error **(d)**

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Check Your Target Learning Performance

Score yourself honestly, then read every explanation — including for the questions you got right. The reasoning is what will transfer to the next, unfamiliar sentence you meet on exam day.

Set 1 (Errors of Preposition) — Answers & Explanations

Q	Ans	Explanation
1	(b)	Correction: "subject to". 'Subject' (meaning liable to / dependent on) is a fixed collocation with 'to', never 'with'.
2	(b)	Correction: "must comply with the standing orders". 'Comply' is always followed by 'with'.
3	(a)	Correction: "indifferent to the criticism". The standard dependent preposition after 'indifferent' is 'to', not 'about'.
4	(b)	Correction: "deprived of basic amenities". 'Deprived' pairs with 'of', not 'off'.
5	(d)	No error. 'Exempted from' followed by a gerund (standing) is correctly used here.
6	(b)	Correction: "insisted on/upon a written assurance". 'Insist' requires 'on' or 'upon' before its object, not 'for'.
7	(b)	Correction: "embark on/upon a career". The fixed phrasal collocation is 'embark on' or 'embark upon', never 'embark in'.
8	(b)	Correction: "immune to any further outbreak". 'Immune' takes 'to', not 'of'.
9	(d)	No error. 'Congratulated … on' is the correct dependent preposition for this verb.
10	(c)	Correction: "capable of leading". 'Capable' is followed by 'of' plus a gerund, never 'to' plus an infinitive.
11	(b)	Correction: "divided among the four claimants". With more than two claimants, 'among' is required, not 'between'.
12	(b)	Correction: "finalised in exactly five working days". Since the sentence insists on an exact point ('no sooner and no later'), it needs 'in' (at the end of the period), not 'within' (before the end of the period).
13	(a)	Correction: "Until the results are declared". Only 'until', not 'till', may open a sentence.
14	(d)	No error. The sentence correctly gives each word its own preposition — 'different from' and 'inferior to' — instead of wrongly sharing one.

15	**(b)**	Correction: “walk across a plank” (and ‘pass through a tunnel’, as already written). A flat plank is crossed with ‘across’; an enclosed tunnel is entered with ‘through’ — the two got swapped here.

Set 2 (Errors of Preposition) — Answers & Explanations

Q	Ans	Explanation
1	**(b)**	Correction: “prone to complacency”. ‘Prone’ always takes ‘to’, not ‘for’.
2	**(b)**	Correction: “refrain from discussing”. A verb following the preposition ‘from’ must be in the gerund form, not the bare infinitive.
3	**(b)**	Correction: “adheres to the code of conduct”. ‘Adhere’ is followed by ‘to’, not ‘on’.
4	**(c)**	Correction: “resort to stricter measures”. ‘Resort’ (meaning to turn to as a course of action) takes ‘to’, not ‘into’.
5	**(d)**	No error. ‘Succumbed to’ is the correct dependent preposition after ‘succumb’.
6	**(a)**	Correction: “oblivious to/of the danger”. ‘Oblivious’ pairs with ‘to’ or ‘of’, not ‘about’.
7	**(d)**	No error. ‘Apologised for’ correctly introduces the reason for the apology.
8	**(b)**	Correction: “blamed the delay on poor coordination”. The pattern is ‘blame + effect + on + cause’, not ‘to’.
9	**(b)**	Correction: “accused of dereliction of duty”. ‘Accused’ is always followed by ‘of’.
10	**(d)**	No error. ‘Benefited … from’ is the standard collocation here.
11	**(b)**	Correction: “suffer from homesickness”. ‘Suffer’ (an ailment or hardship) is followed by ‘from’, not ‘with’.
12	**(b)**	Correction: “aspires to command”. ‘Aspire’ takes ‘to’, directly followed by the base verb — not ‘for’ plus a gerund.
13	**(c)**	Correction: “dwelling too much on minor procedural lapses”. ‘Dwell’ (to linger over a thought) takes ‘on’, not ‘in’.
14	**(a)**	Correction: “senior to his course-mate”. Comparative-sounding words of Latin origin — senior, junior, superior, inferior, prior — take ‘to’, never ‘than’.
15	**(d)**	No error. ‘Prior to’ is a correct, fixed formal phrase meaning ‘before’.

That's a wrap for this booklet — but not for your practice. Come back here whenever a rule feels shaky, and keep timing yourself against fresh questions. Good luck, and see you at the SSB!