

Ask about English

Using the word 'which'



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Annie Cheng in China asks:

How do we know whether we should say 'in which', 'at which', 'of which' or 'for which'?

Karen Adams answers:

Thanks very much for your question Annie, it actually gives us two questions in one.

So let's look at the first one – the prepositions that you've given us are in which, at which, of which, for which – which one do we choose? Basically, our choice of preposition is governed by the verb that relates to it. So, for example, if we take the phrase "in which" - we might say "That's the film in which I'm interested." Another way of saying this is "That's the film I'm interested in." It's the verb "interested" that tells us we need to use the preposition "in".

Similarly, with "at which" – "that's the university at which I studied." Another way of saying this is "That's the university which I studied at." It's the verb "study" that tells us we need to use the preposition "at".

However, in written English, we try to avoid putting the preposition at the end of the sentence. We can say "That's the film I'm interested in." "That's the university which I studied at." "That's a song I've heard of." But when we're writing formal English, we try to take that preposition and put it into the middle of the sentence. This is where we need to use the relative pronoun which – "That's the university I studied at." "That's the university at which I studied." "That's the film I'm interested in." "That's the film in which I'm interested."

The important thing to remember is this is found in very formal written English and when we're speaking we would normally put the preposition at the end of the sentence. So it's not really a big problem.

However, if you want to make your written language very formal then this is where you need to consider putting the preposition into the middle of the sentence before the relative pronoun.

I hope that helps you.

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