Some Vital Prepositions and Their Uses

Preposition is used with . . .

in boundaries, borders, shapes, walls, spans, passengers of cars/trucks/
smaller vehicles: in Belgium, in January, in King County, in Bellevue, in a circle,
in a car, in a prop plane, in a room,

after a beginning but before an end: in the morning/afternoon/evening, in my memory, in World War II, in the chaos of the riot,

the contents of a communication medium: in the article/essay/movie/
episode/email/speech/text/posting . . .

(Compare to into, used for movement from outside a boundary to inside:
I went into my room. Or for transformations: He turned into a werewolf.)

of a piece or pieces relating to a larger whole, belonging, possession:
the fingers of my right hand, a friend of my sister, members of Congress,
a member of my family, (In the history of telling time, the fifth hour of the clock
became five o’clock)

most of a determined noun* (singular or plural): He had eaten most of an apple.
I said goodbye to most of my friends. Most of the class did not do the assignment.

* “Determined noun” = determiner + noun, e.g., an apple, my friends, the assignment, his backpack or a noun naming something that can be discussed in parts, such as a place:
I don’t drive in most of Bellevue.

In contrast, most (no “of”) must be followed by a plural undetermined noun. (Compare: Most Americans are ignorant about geography. Most breakfast cereals are loaded with sugar. (correct)

*He ate most apple. *Most apple is eaten already. (*incorrect)

because of a noun equivalent, while because (no “of”) must be followed by a clause:
Because of George’s tardiness (noun equiv.), the tour started late.
I was grouchy because of a headache (noun equiv.).
(Compare with \textit{Because} George was tardy (clause), \textit{the tour started late. I was grouchy because} I had a headache (clause).)

\textbf{Preposition} is used with . . .

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{at} a finite point, a junction, a specific time, a passive object of an action: \\
      \textit{at} 40.35°N and 150.75°W, \textit{at} the corner of 5\textsuperscript{th} Avenue and Main Street, \\
      \textit{at} 5:35 \textit{p.m.}, \textit{look} \textit{at} the television, “You’re talking \textit{at} me, not \textit{to} me!”
      (idiom exception: \textit{He goes for walks at night. not *at morning, or *at afternoon})
  \item \textit{by} means of achieving a goal: \textit{She goes everywhere \textit{by} foot.}
      \textit{I found the information \textit{by} searching the Internet. She will get into Harvard \textit{by} getting good grades and test scores and \textit{by} knowing how to charm people.}
  \item \textit{passing a stationary object: I drove \textit{by} your house last night.}
  \item \textit{authorship: This story is \textit{by} Stephen Fry.}
  \item \textit{the doer of a passive verb: \textit{He is followed \textit{by} thousands of Twitter members.}}
  \item \textit{with} accompaniment, joining, alliances, affiliation, agreement: \textit{My friends went \textit{with} me. Mix magenta \textit{with} cyan and you’ll get purple. She is \textit{with} Seattle City Light.}
      \textit{i’m \textit{with} you on this.}
      a tool or instrument used to achieve a goal: \textit{I built it \textit{with} my own two hands.}
      \textit{He enticed me over \textit{with} a silken-voiced “How you doin’?”}
  \item \textit{to} an active or willing recipient: \textit{I talked \textit{to} you yesterday.} (Compare \textit{I talked at you yesterday} (incorrect), and \textit{I yelled at you yesterday.}) \textit{She ran \textit{to} her daddy’s arms.}
      a destination: \textit{I sent a message \textit{to} you. I’m going \textit{to} class. She flew \textit{to} Istanbul.}
      connects a main verb to a second verb, esp. verbs of mental actions that can cause other actions: \textit{I want \textit{to} buy a new car. I hate \textit{to} bother you. I decided \textit{to} do some research (in order) \textit{to} make \textit{a} better-informed decision.}
\end{itemize}

The verbs \textit{make, let, see,} and \textit{hear} are NOT followed by “\textit{to}” before a bare infinitive verb: \\
\textit{Don’t let the cat go outside;} \textit{make her stay indoors.}
\textit{They made me talk to the crowd; it let me know} they had confidence in my ability.
\textit{I could see you wave from the balcony; I could not, however, hear you yell “Fire!”}

Note: Unlike \textit{let, allow} DOES use \textit{to} after it: \textit{Please allow me \textit{to} introduce myself.}
Preposition is used with . . .

**on** something touching a surface: *on the road, on my face, on the table, on the (printed) page, on the wall*

content broadcast by an electronic medium: *on television, on the radio, on the phone, on the Internet* (compare to *in a book, or in the newspaper*)

the topic of communication: *a paper on climate change, a movie on the life of Helen Keller, a speech on the dangers of texting while driving*

passengers or cargo of large, flat-level vehicles and self-powered vehicles: *on a bus, on a train, on an airplane, on a boat, on a motorcycle, on a bicycle, on a skateboard* (compare to *in a car, in a truck, in a van*)

**for** an action performed in the pursuit of a result/goal, or toward the benefit of someone: *shop for groceries, study for a test, apply for admission, run for mayor, work for my boss*

a thing that exists in order to benefit someone or something: *a gift for you*

an action with a desired goal or purpose in the mind of the subject: “I did it for love!” or *We did it for all the wrong reasons.*

duration: *I studied for five hours.*

**about** relating a composition or creative work to its subject or theme: *This movie is about a woman astronaut who survives an accident in outer space. This essay/poem/painting is about forgiveness. This book is about geologic formations of the Pleistocene.*

the focus of one’s attention and activity: *We tried to go about our business like nothing had happened.*

actions involving the full extent of an area (“About” is often used in British English where Americans use “around,” but they are also combined to avoid word repetition): *I went about making breakfast while the kids stumbled around upstairs. I went about the room tidying pillows and books. I looked about for help. You are free to move about the cabin.*

approximate figures or estimations: *It’s been about five years since we saw him. I’m about finished with my project.*