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The Nerd's Guide to Russian Prepositions In and On

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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В кресле: in the (comfy) chair

It's almost impossible to write about Ukraine without touching on the subject of prepositions: в Украине or на Украине (something like "in Ukraine" and "in the Ukraine"). But it is absolutely impossible to touch on the subject of Ukraine and prepositional use and not get bombarded by dozens of mostly erroneous grammatical claims.

I am nothing if not a boring pedant, so I bring you the definitive column on using в and на.

It's actually just a set of rules with only a few exceptions. The only trick to it is getting your head around a few spatial concepts, like the notion of borders.

Let's begin with в (in), which is used to describe something or someone being inside a closed space. Ключ в ящике (The key is in the drawer.) The tricky bit is understanding what a closed space is. In Russian, it means anything with borders, literal or figurative.

Buildings, most rooms, things with doors or drawers, water: В доме, в детской комнате, в шкафу, плавать в море (In the house, in the kid's room, in the wardrobe, to swim in the sea). Note that in Russian you sit в кресле (in the armchair), since historically armchairs had, well, arms and the sitter was almost inside the structure of the chair.

Continents and the majority of countries: в Азии, в России, в США, в Европе (in Asia, in Russia, in the U.S., in Europe).

Administrative units like cities, towns, villages, districts, regions, settlements, named or not: В Москве, в деревне, в Центральном округе, в Чечне, в штате Нью-Йорк, в республике, в Сибири, в Хабаровском крае (in Moscow, in the village, in the Central district, in Chechnya, in New York state, in the republic, in Siberia, in Khabarovsk territory).

Buildings, offices and organizations: В банке, в музее, в театре, в кино, в школе, в институте (in the bank, in the museum, in the theater, in the movie theater, in the school, in the institute).

Groups of people: в организации, в отделе кадров, в бухгалтерии, в парламенте, в правительстве (in the organization, in the human resources department, in the accounting office, in the parliament, in the government).

And that's it for в.

На is where it gets a bit more nit-picky and conceptual. На means on something or in an open space with vague or nonexistent borders.

On horizontal surfaces, with one exception: на пляже, на стуле, на столе, на песке, на втором этаже (on the beach, on the chair (not armchair), on the table, on the sand, on the second floor). The exception is easy to remember because it exists in English, too: на стене (on the wall).

Compass points or places that use a directional noun in their names: На юге, на Дальнем востоке, на западе, на юго-востоке (in the south, in the Far East, in the West, in the Southeast).

Islands: на Сахалине, на Мальте, на Курильских островах, на Кубе (on Sakhalin, on Malta, on the Kurile Islands, on Cuba). Note that one island trumps country, that is, the only countries that use на are countries on one island. So, since the United Kingdom is on more than one island, it's в Великобритании (in Great Britain), but since Cuba is on just one island, it's на Кубе (in Cuba).

Peninsulas, with one half-exception: на Камчатке, на Чукотке (in Kamchatka, in Chukotka). The half-exception is Crimea. You say на Крымском полуострове (on the Crimean

Peninsula) but в Крыму (in Crimea).

Area described by a noun ending in -щина (a general area, often where a national group lived or lives: на Смоленщине, на Лемковщине (in the traditional Smolensk lands, in lands where the Lemkos traditionally lived).

Regions on, near or between water — lakes, rivers, seas, oceans: на Волге, на Чёрном море, на Тихом океане, на Кубани, на Байкале, на Амуре (near the Volga, near the Black Sea, by the Pacific Ocean, in the Kuban region, by Lake Baikal, by the Amur River).

Mountains in the singular. This is the tricky bit, but there is some variation of usage, which means that you can relax about it. In general, you use на for a mountain or range that is described in the singular in Russian, although they might be described in the plural in English: на Кавказе, на Урале, на Алтае (in the Caucasus, in the Urals, in the Altai mountains). You use в for mountain ranges described in the plural in Russian, like в Карпатах (in the Carpathians). Or you can remember it this way: на горе (on the mountain) but в горах (in the mountains).

Open spaces: на улице, на площади, на Невском проспекте (on the street, on the square, on Nevsky Prospekt).

Spaces that were open in the past: на кухне, на почте, на вокзале (in the kitchen, at the Post Office, at the station).

Factories and means of transportation, with one conceptual exception: работать на заводе, на фабрике; ехать на машине, на поезде, на автобусе; летать на самолете (to work at a factory or plant; to travel by car, train, bus; to go by plane). The exception is when you are speaking about something that happened inside the means of transportation: Очень жарко было в автобусе (It was really hot in the bus.) But general travel "by means of" uses на.

Events, places of learning and activities, with one exception: на факультете русского языке, на уроке, на концерте, на выставке, на опере, на балете, на спектакле (in the Russian language department, in the lesson, at the concert, at the exhibition, at the opera, at the ballet, at the play). The exception is travel: в командировке, в путешествии, в поездке, в дороге (on a business trip, in travels, on a trip, on the road).

And that's it.

If you are a nerd — that is, a kindred spirit — you can use this as a cheat sheet on your bulletin board or in your wallet. If you are a troll, please read this carefully and then: Please stop writing me.

Michele A. Berdy is the Arts Editor and author of "The Russian Word's Worth," a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

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