Some Vital Prepositions and Their Uses

Preposition   is used with . . .

in    boundaries, borders, shapes, walls, spans, passengers of cars/trucks/
smaller vehicles, after a beginning but before an end, the contents of a
communication medium

in Belgium, in January, in King County, in Bellevue, in a circle, in a car,
in a prop plane, in a room, in the morning/afternoon/evening, in my
mind/memory, in World War II, in the chaos of the riot,
in the article/essay/movie/episode/email/speech . . .

(Compare to into, said about movement from outside a boundary to being
inside, or said about transformations: I went into my room. 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, (the fifth hour of the clock over time became five
o’clock)

most of    a determined noun* (singular or plural), while most must be followed by
a plural undetermined noun.
He had eaten most of an apple.
I said goodbye to most of my friends.
Most of the class did not do the assignment.
I don’t drive in most of Bellevue.
(Compare Most Americans are ignorant about geography. Most breakfast
cereals are loaded with sugar. *He ate most apple.
*Most apple is eaten already.)

* “Determined noun” means determiner + noun, e.g., an apple, my friends, the assignment,
or a noun naming something that can be discussed in parts, such as a place name.
Preposition is used with . . .

**because of**  
a noun equivalent, while because must be followed by a clause:  
*Because of George’s tardiness, the tour started late.*  
*I was grouchy because of a headache.*  
(Compare *Because George was tardy, the tour started late.*  
*I was grouchy because I had a headache.*)

**at**  
a finite point, a junction, a specific time, a passive object of an action  
*at 40.35°N and 150.75°W, at the corner of 5th Avenue and Main Street, at 5:35 p.m., look at the television, “You’re talking at me, not to me!”*  
(idiom: *He goes for walks at night. not *at morning, or *at afternoon)

**by**  
means of achieving a goal, passing a stationary object, authorship,  
the doer of a passive verb  
*She goes everywhere by foot. I found the information by searching the Internet.*  
*I drove by your house last night. She will get into Harvard by getting good grades and test scores and by knowing how to charm people. This story is by Stephen Fry. He is followed by thousands of Twitter members.*

**with**  
accompaniment, joining, alliances, affiliation, agreement,  
a tool or instrument used to achieve a goal  
*My friends went with me. Mix magenta with cyan and you’ll get purple.*  
*She is with Seattle City Light. I’m with you on this. I built it with my own two hands. He enticed me over with a silken-voiced “How you doin’?”*

**to**  
an active or willing recipient; a destination; connects a main verb to a second verb, esp. verbs of mental actions that can cause other actions  
*I talked to you yesterday. (Compare I talked at you yesterday, and I yelled at you yesterday.) She ran to her daddy’s arms. I sent a message to you. I’m going to class. She flew to Istanbul. I want to buy a new car. I hate to bother you. I decided to do some research (in order) to make a better-informed decision.*
The verbs *make, let, see,* and *hear* are not followed by *to* before a bare infinitive verb:

*Don’t let the cat go outside; make her stay indoors.*  
*They made me talk to the crowd; it let me know they had confidence in my ability.*  
*I could see you wave from the balcony; I could not, however, hear you yell “Fire!”*  
(Unlike *let, allow* does use *to* after it: *Please allow me to introduce myself.*)

**Preposition is used with . . .**

*on* something touching a surface; content broadcast by an electronic medium; the topic of communication; passengers or cargo of large, flat-level vehicles and self-powered vehicles

*on the road, on my face, on the table, on the (printed) page, on the wall; on television, on the radio, on the phone, on the Internet* (compare to *in a book, or in the newspaper*); *a paper on climate change, a movie on the life of Helen Keller, a speech on the dangers of texting while driving; on a bus, on a train, on an airplane, on a boat, on a motorcycle, on a bicycle, on a skateboard*

*for* an action performed in the pursuit of a result/goal or toward the benefit of someone; a thing that exists in order to benefit someone; an action with a desired goal or purpose in the mind of the subject; duration

*shop for groceries, study for a test, apply for admission, run for mayor, work for my boss; a gift for you; “I did it for love!” or We did it for all the wrong reasons; I studied for five hours*

*about* relating a composition or creative work to its subject or theme; the focus of one’s attention and activity; (adverb) actions involving the full extent of an area (”about” often used in British English where Americans use “around” but also combined to avoid word repetition); (adverb) approximate figures or estimations

*This essay/book/movie/poem/game/blog post/painting/etc. is about a woman astronaut who survives an accident in outer space/is about forgiveness/is about geologic formations of the Pleistocene, etc.; We tried to go about our business like nothing had happened, 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; It’s been about five years since we saw him, I’m about finished with my project*