

by vs. with

General rule

The prepositions "by" and "with" can both be used to say how somebody does something, but there is an important difference.

We use "by" to talk about an action - what we do to get a result. We use "with" to talk about a tool or other object - what we use to get a result.

Compare:

I killed the spider by hitting it. (Note - ing form after by)

I killed the spider with a shoe it. (Not ... by a shoe)

Jack studied vocabulary by using a dictionary.

Jack studied vocabulary with a dictionary.

1-1. by + ing)

I bake the bread by using an old coal oven.

Simon improved his English by listening to the radio.

Akira caught the mouse by setting a trap.

1-2. by + noun (communication, transportation)

I will contact you by email/ phone/ text.

I will go by bus/ taxi/ train/ airplane.

I came by bus/ taxi/ train/ airplane.

1-3. Passive clause

In passive clauses "by" introduces the agent - the person or thing that does the action.

I was interviewed by three directors.

My car was damaged by a falling branch.

2. with (body parts, tools, instruments)

Brad caught the mouse with a trap.

I point with my finger.

I think with my brain.

I cleaned the floor with a mop.

I ate dinner with a fork.

Compare:

He was killed by a heavy stone. (This could mean 'A stone fell and killed him'.)

He was killed with a heavy stone. (This could mean 'somebody used a stone to kill him'.)