

Collocations

A collocation is a combination of two or more words that often go together. These combinations just sound “right” to native speakers, whereas other combinations may just sound “wrong.” For example, English speakers say “fast food” but not “quick food,” whereas we say “quick meal” but not “fast meal.” Usage also depends on the situation being described. At the Writing Center, we speak of developing a “strong argument,” but we wouldn’t use that expression to describe an argument with a person, in which case we’d say “heated” or “big.” English has thousands of collocations, but since there are no clear rules in how they are formed, they must be learned. Collocations differ from idioms. The idiomatic expression “He can’t see the forest for the trees” has a figurative meaning and has nothing to do with a forest or trees, while the collocation “He drives a hard bargain” has a literal meaning related to the concept of bargaining.

Why Learn Collocations?

- Your English will be more natural and more fluent, like a native-speaker.
- Since the precise meaning of a word is determined in context, the words that surround and combine with it (i.e., by collocation), your written and spoken output will be more precise.
- It is easier for our brains to remember and use language in chunks or blocks than as single words.

How to Learn Collocations

- Be aware of collocations. Try to recognize them when you see or hear them.
- Treat collocations as single blocks of language. Learn strongly support, not strongly + support.
- When you learn a new word, write down other words that associate or collocate with it (remember distinctly, remember vaguely, remember vividly or distinctly remember...)
[Note that in some cases, word order can be reversed without affecting meaning.]
- Read, read, read! Reading is an excellent way to learn vocabulary and collocations in context.
- Practice collocations regularly so they can “glue together” in your mind.
- Learn collocations in groups that work for you. You could learn them by topic (time, number, weather, money, family) or by a particular word (take action, take a chance, take an exam).
- You can find information on collocations in any good learner’s dictionary and online.

Types of Collocations

There are different types of collocations made from combinations of verb, noun, adjective, etc. Some of the most common types are:

Adverb + Adjective:	highly sophisticated (<i>NOT completely sophisticated</i>); utterly fascinating (<i>NOT utterly interesting</i>)
Adjective + Noun:	powerful computer (<i>NOT strong computer</i>); excruciating pain (<i>NOT excruciating joy</i>)
Adjective + Preposition:	interested in (<i>NOT interested of</i>); aware of (<i>NOT aware in</i>)
Noun + Noun:	a surge of anger (<i>NOT a rush of anger</i>)
Noun + Verb:	lions roar (<i>NOT lions bark</i>)
Verb + Noun:	do homework (<i>NOT make homework</i>)
Verb + Expression	
With Preposition:	burst into tears (<i>NOT blow up in tears</i>)
Verb + Adverb:	wave frantically (<i>NOT wave feverishly</i>)

Examples of Some Commonly Used Verb Collocations

BREAK a habit; the rules; someone's heart; off negotiations
 CATCH a cold; the flu; sight of; fire; someone's eye/attention
 COME late; on time; to a decision; into view; under attack
 DO business; someone a favor; your best; the shopping
 GET a job; the message; to sleep; busy; along with someone
 GIVE advice; a chance; an example; the impression; some thought to; your opinion
 GO broke; out of/into business; to war; on foot; by bus/car/plane/train
 HAVE a drink; breakfast/lunch/dinner; sympathy for someone
 KEEP a promise; an appointment; the change; calm; in touch
 MAKE a mistake; an effort; progress; do; room for someone/something
 PAY a fine; the full price; attention to; by credit card/check
 TAKE a break; an exam; notes; on something; up with someone; advantage of

Examples of Commonly Used Collocations with Certain Expressions

TIME: Free time; spend time; waste time; right on time; run out of time; have/make time for; time passes/goes by; great deal of time; from dawn to dusk; the end of time.

BUSINESS: Launch a product; lay off/take on staff; market forces; sales figures; chair a meeting; close a deal; dismiss an offer; run the risk; foreclose (up)on; supply and demand; high powered.

GENERAL: Bear in mind; draw a conclusion; alive and well; safe and sound; quick and easy; ready, willing and able; odds and ends; each and every; first and foremost; wear and tear; hit or miss; feast or famine; sink or swim; no ifs, ands or buts; win or lose; dirt cheap; bone dry; tough minded; wide awake; sound asleep; work like a dog; cry like a baby; drive like a maniac; pretty as a picture; flat as a pancake; American as apple pie; sly as a fox; happy as a clam; busy as a bee.

QUANTIFIERS and CLASSIFIERS: Bar of chocolate; pad of paper; deck of cards; lump of sugar; bottle of wine; can of soup; bunch of carrots; head of lettuce; clump of grass; flock of geese; ball of string; tube of toothpaste; stick of butter; six-pack of beer; pack of gum; loaf of bread; ear of corn; clove of garlic; box of cereal; sack of potatoes; drop of water; piece of information.

Examples of Common Academic Collocations

Consist [+of]: A typical formal analysis paper consists of lots of descriptive words and phrases.
 Derived [+from]: Indigo is named for the purple dye derived from the *Indigofera Tinctoria* plant.
 Focus [+on]: Modern U.S. education practice has tended to focus on cooperative learning.
 Compensate [+for]: Her intelligence more than compensates for her lack of experience.
 Contribute [+to]: Various factors contributed to his failure to pass the course.
 Correspond [+with/to]: The numbers correspond with distinct points on the map.
 Interact [+with]: Vanessa interacts well with other students in the class.
 Concentrate [+on]: She was too distracted to concentrate on her assignment.
 Conflict [+with]: The "C-" I got on my English paper conflicts with what I feel I truly deserved.
 Extract [+ from]: Maple syrup is made from the sap extracted from several species of maple trees.
 Isolate [+from]: The figure in the background is isolated from the rest of the painting.
 Coincide [+with]: Glacial melting coincides with the rise of CO₂ in the atmosphere.

Collocations Lists and Resources Online

<http://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/collocations-lists.htm>
<http://www.esl.about.com/library/vocabulary/bicollocation.1.htm>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collocation>