

# Oxford Collocations Dictionary (OUP, 2002)

## What is collocation?

Collocation is the way words combine in a language to produce natural-sounding speech and writing. For example, in English you say *strong wind* but *heavy rain*. It would not be normal to say *\*heavy wind* or *\*strong rain*. And whilst all four of these words would be recognized by a learner at pre-intermediate or even elementary level, it takes a greater degree of competence with the language to combine them correctly in productive use. To a native-speaker these combinations are highly predictable; to a learner they are anything but.

Combinations of words in a language can be ranged on a cline from the totally free – see *a man/car/book* – to the totally fixed and idiomatic – *not see the wood for the trees*. This idiom is not only fixed in form, it also has nothing whatever to do with wood or trees. Between these two extremes, there is a whole range of nouns that take the verb *see* in a way that is neither totally predictable nor totally opaque as to meaning. These run from the fairly 'weak' collocation *see a film* (which elementary students learn as a 'chunk' without pausing to reflect that this is not quite the literal meaning of *see*) through the 'medium strength' *see a doctor* to the 'stronger' collocations of *see danger/reason/the point*. All these combinations, apart from those at the very extremes of the cline, can be called collocation. And it is combinations such as these – particularly in the 'medium-strength' area – that are vital to communicative competence in English.

## Why is collocation important?

Collocation runs through the whole of the English language. No piece of natural spoken or written English is totally free of collocation. For the student, choosing the right collocation will make his speech and writing sound much more natural, more native-speaker-like, even when basic intelligibility does not seem to be at issue. A student who talks about *\*strong rain* may make himself understood, but possibly not without provoking a smile or a correction, which may or may not matter. He will certainly be marked down for it in an exam.

But, perhaps even more importantly than this, language that is collocationally rich is also more precise. This is because most single words in the English language – especially the more common words – embrace a whole range of meanings, some quite distinct, and some that shade into each other by degrees. The precise meaning in any context is determined by that context: by the words that surround and combine with the core word – by collocation. A student who chooses the best collocation will express himself much more clearly and be able to convey not just a general meaning, but something quite precise. Compare, for example, the following two sentences:

*This is a good book and contains a lot of interesting details.*

*This is a fascinating book and contains a wealth of historical detail.*

Both sentences are perfectly 'correct' in terms of grammar and vocabulary, but which communicates more (both about the book under discussion *and* the person discussing it)?

'The full range of collocation', as well as implying collocations of different strengths, also covers all the following types of combination:

adjective + noun: *bright/harsh/intense/strong light*

quantifier + noun: *a beam/ray of light*

verb + noun: *cast/emit/give/provide/shed light*

noun + verb: *light gleams/glows/shines*

noun + noun: *a light source*

preposition + noun: *by the light of the moon*

noun + preposition: *the light from the window*

adverb + verb: *choose carefully*

verb + verb: *be free to choose*

verb + preposition: *choose between two things*

verb + adjective: *make/keep/declare sth safe*

adverb + adjective: *perfectly/not entirely/environmentally safe*

adjective + preposition: *safe from attack*

plus short phrases including the headword: *the speed of light, pick and choose, safe and sound*