

Notes on Collocations or Word Clusters in E4BT (lexical and grammatical collocations)

What is a collocation (word-cluster)?

A collocation is two or more words that often go together. These combinations just sound “right” [✓] to a native English speaker, who uses them all the time. On the other hand, other combinations may be unnatural and just sound “wrong” [✗] – even if the meaning would seem the same.

Compare, for example, the following:

- ✧ *fast food* [✓] vs *quick food* or *speedy food* or *rapid food* [✗]
- ✧ *avian influenza* or *bird flu* [✓] vs *avian flu* or *bird influenza* [✗]
- ✧ *bone marrow* [✓] vs *bony marrow* or *osseous marrow* [✗]
- ✧ *death rate* or *mortality rate* or *fatality rate* [✓] vs *rate of death* or *rate of mortality* or *rate of fatality* [✗]
- ✧ *diabetes mellitus* [✓] vs *mellitus diabetes* [✗]
- ✧ *foodborne disease/illness* [✓] vs *disease/illness of food origin* [✗]
- ✧ *herd immunity* or *herd effect* [✓] vs *immunity of herd* or *flock immunity* [✗]
- ✧ *infectious disease/illness* [✓] vs *infective disease/illness* [✗]
- ✧ *laboratory mice* [✓] vs *mice of laboratory* [✗]
- ✧ *meat-and-bone meal* [✓] vs *bone-and-meat meal* or *animal-borne flour* [✗]
- ✧ *mild flu* [✓] vs *slight flu* or *light flu* [✗]
- ✧ *mild fever* [✓] vs *slight fever* or *light fever* [✗]
- ✧ *morbidity rate*¹ [✓] vs *spreading rate* [✗]
- ✧ <the sudden onset of an illness> [✓] vs <the sudden beginning of an illness> or <the sudden start of an illness> [✗]
- ✧ *risk factors* [✓] vs *factors of risk* [✗]
- ✧ *slight stomach ache* [✓] vs *mild stomach ache* [✗]

¹ The **morbidity rate** is the frequency or proportion with which a disease appears in a population. **Italian equivalent:** “tasso di morbidità”, “tasso di diffusione”.

A synonym is **prevalence** – i.e., the number of disease cases *present* in a particular population at a given time; whereas **incidence** is the number of new cases that *develop* during a specified time period.

Prevalence answers “How many people have this disease right now?” or “How many people have had this disease during this time period?”. Incidence answers “How many people acquired the disease during a specified time period?”.

- ✧ *spinal cord* [✓] vs *spinal marrow* [✗]
- ✧ *stem cells* [✓] vs *staminal cells* [✗]

How to learn collocations

- ✧ treat collocations as **single blocks of language**, think of them as individual blocks and learn, for instance, *to strongly support*, not “strongly” + “to support”;
- ✧ when you learn a new word, **write down other words that collocate with it** (*to spread + easily / + gradually / + slowly / + quickly*);
- ✧ learn collocations in groups that work for you – e.g. you could organize and learn them **by topic** or **by a particular word**;
- ✧ you can find information on collocations (often in bold) in any good dictionary – both monolingual and bilingual – as well as on www.wordreference.com;
- ✧ you can also find specialised dictionaries of collocations, such as the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary* (2001), the *MacMillan Collocations Dictionary* (2010) and www.ozdic.com.

Types of collocations

There are several different types of collocations made from combinations of items from the various word-classes – being they lexical or grammatical. Some examples of the most common types are given below:

lexical collocations

- ✧ **adv + adj** ➡ *highly contagious*, ...
- ✧ **adj + g.n./p.n.** ➡ *Veterinary Medicine; bacterial infection; white / blue / red / green biotechnology, general practitioner, genetic code*...
- ✧ **n + n** ➡ *health facility, prescription drug, maintenance host, reservoir host, gene therapy, accident and emergency*, ...
- ✧ **n + v** ➡ *The illness affected* hundreds of people in the area; ...
- ✧ **v + n** ➡ *to trigger an immune response*, ...
- ✧ **v + adj** ➡ *to become ill / sick, to fall ill, to get ill / sick; to become infected* ...
- ✧ **v + adv** ➡ *to easily spread, to further investigate*...

grammatical collocations

- ✧ **v + preposition** ➡ *to suffer **from**; to be composed **of**; to be made **up of**, to be named **after**; to participate **in**; to be associated **with**; to be infected **with**; to focus **on**; to deal **with**; to feed **on**; to refer **to**; to result **in** (= to cause); to result **from** (= to be caused by); to turn **into** ... and all the other so-called prepositional / phrasal verbs!*
- ✧ **adj. + preposition** ➡ *responsible **for**; interested **in**; dependent **on**; consistent **with**; ...*
- ✧ **definite article + certain place names:** *the US, the USA, the United States; the UK, the United Kingdom; the Atlantic Ocean; the Pacific; the Mediterranean; the Suez Canal; ...*
- ✧ **definite article + certain institutions:** *the World Health Organization; the European Medicines Agency; ...*
- ✧ **definite article in superlative expressions:** *the most effective; the healthiest, ...*
- ✧ **linking expressions** ➡ *according to / in accordance with / on the basis of / based on; as well as; as well; at the basis of; such as; due to / because of; in order to; on the contrary; so far / to date (= up to now), “that is,”; in addition; in addition to; with regard to / with reference to; both ... and; either ... or; neither ... nor; on the one hand ... on the other (hand). ...*