

Notes on Word Clusters in English for Political Studies

(lexical and grammatical collocations)

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.

(an excerpt from AA.VV., 2009^{II}:
Oxford Collocations Dictionary, OUP,)

What is collocation?

If you want to use a word naturally, you need to learn the other words that often go with it (word partners). These can be very different from language to language. For example, in English we say:

I missed the bus (= I didn't catch the bus) [~~NOT I lost the bus~~]

She made a mistake [~~NOT she did a mistake~~]

A heavy smoker (= someone who smokes a lot) [~~NOT a strong smoker or a big smoker~~]

It was a serious illness [~~NOT a big illness or a strong illness~~]

(an excerpt from McCarthy M. and F. O'Dell, 2017:
English Vocabulary in Use (Advanced), CUP)

A collocation is a pair or group of words that are often used together. These combinations sound natural to native speakers, but students of English have to make a special effort to learn them because they are often difficult to guess. Some combinations just sound 'wrong' to native speakers of English. For example, the adjective *fast* collocates with *cars*, but not with *a glance*.

We say ...	We don't say ...
fast cars	quick cars
fast food	quick food
a quick glance	a fast glance
a quick meal	a fast meal

Learning collocations is an important part of learning the vocabulary of a language. Some collocations are fixed, or very strong, for example **take a photo**, where no word other than *take* collocates with *photo* to give the same meaning. Some collocations are more open, where several different words may be used to give a similar meaning, for example **keep to / stick to the rules**. Here are some more examples of collocations.

You must **make an effort** and study for your exams (NOT ~~do~~ an effort)

Did you **watch** TV last night? (NOT ~~look at~~ TV)

This car has a very **powerful engine**. It can do 200 km an hour. (NOT ~~strong~~ engine)

There are some **ancient monuments** nearby. (NOT ~~antique~~ monuments)

Sometimes, a pair of words may not be absolutely wrong, and people will understand what is meant, but it may not be the natural, normal collocation. If someone says *I did a few mistakes* they will be understood, but a fluent speaker of English would probably say **I made a few mistakes**.

(an excerpt from McCarthy M. and F. O'Dell, 2017:
English Collocations in Use, CUP)

• Collocation

When words co-occur or are used together frequently they are said to collocate. Pairs of words can co-occur in numerous ways. Some can be new or *free* collocations but most follow linguistic conventions and are *fixed* collocations for which there are no real explanations. It is a good idea for learners to be aware of collocations. The more they are aware of the combination of words that often occur together, the easier reading becomes and the more chance there is of using vocabulary appropriately and correctly.

- The most common types of combinations are: adjective + noun (*full employment*); adverb + adjective or past participle (*fully aware, relatively scarce*); verb + noun (*to achieve/reach a goal, to earn a living*); noun + verb (*prices fall/rise*); noun + noun (*population growth, employment rate*).
- Some words, especially commonly used verbs, have an extremely wide range of collocations, like: *to do* – *to do business, to do well/badly, to do harm/good, to do right/wrong, to do homework*; *to make* – *to make money, to make arrangements, to make a decision/speech/choice*.

(an excerpt from AA.VV., 2004: *English in Context: Explorations in a Grammar of Discourse*, Milan, LED)

A collocation is, therefore, two or more words that usually go together – sometimes in that given order as well.

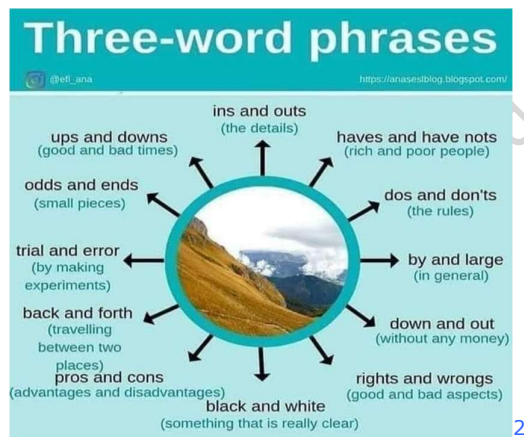
Such combinations just sound "right" [✓] to a native English speaker, who uses them all the time. On the other hand, other combinations may be unnatural and just sound "wrong" [✗] – even if the meaning would seem the same.

Compare, for example, the following:

- *fast food* [✓] vs *quick food* [✗]
- *air conditioning* [✓] vs *conditioning air* [✗]
- *assets and liabilities* [✓] vs *liabilities and assets* [✗]
- *Attorney-General* [✓] vs *General Attorney* [✗]
- *body politic*¹ [✓] vs *politic body* [✗]
- *by-election* [✓] vs *supplementary election* [✗]
- *farms and factories* [✓] vs *factories and farms* [✗]

¹ The people of a nation, state, or society considered collectively as an organized group of citizens. **Italian equivalent: "elettorato", "nazione", "popolo".**

- *goods and services* [✓] vs *services and goods* [✗]
- *heir-apparent* [✓] vs *apparent heir* [✗]
- *job market* [✓] vs *work market* [✗]
- *peace talks* [✓] vs *talks of peace* [✗]
- *snap elections* [✓] vs *sudden elections* [✗]
- *stock exchange* or *stock market* [✓] vs *share exchange* or *share market* [✗]
- *to pass a law* [✓] vs *to approve a law* [✗]
- *unemployment rate* [✓] vs *joblessness rate* [✗]



Good examples of collocations in the domain of Legal, Political and Business English are verbs such as *to breach*, *to break*, *to disobey*, *to infringe* and *to violate* – which are synonyms and fundamentally all mean the same thing but which collocate with different nouns:

- to breach a contract
- to breach / to break somebody's trust
- to breach confidentiality
- to breach security
- to break / to disobey / to violate the law
- to break a treaty
- to break / to disobey / to infringe a rule
- to break speed limits

² In order to understand and explain most of these examples, see Unit 3b, a.y. 2021/2022: "Conversion and Functional Shift in EPS".

- to disobey / to break an order
- to disobey a command
- to disobey a court order
- to disobey / to break / to infringe a rule
- to disobey / to break / to infringe the law

- to infringe a right
- to infringe copyright
- to infringe a trademark
- to infringe a patent
- to infringe / to break / to disobey a rule

- to violate / to break / to disobey the law
- to violate privacy
- to violate sanctions
- to violate human rights

In order to learn English correctly, both in its written and spoken form, you need to:

- 1)** be aware of collocations and try to recognize them when you see or hear them;
- 2)** treat collocations as single blocks of language;
- 3)** when you learn a new word, write down other words that usually collocate with it – for example, the range of adverbs that go with a verb and modify its meaning;
- 4)** learn collocations in groups that work for you – e.g. you could learn them **by topic** or **by a particular word**, as in the example of the noun "money" given below:



- 5) find information on collocations (often in bold) in any good dictionary – both monolingual and bilingual;
- 6) find specialised dictionaries of collocations, such as the *Oxford Collocations Dictionary*³, the *MacMillan Collocations Dictionary*⁴, the *Longman Collocations Dictionary and Thesaurus*⁵ and www.ozdic.com

There are **several different types of collocations made from combinations of items from the various word-classes** – being they lexical or grammatical.

Some of the most common types are:

1) LEXICAL COLLOCATIONS

- **n + n** → *career politician; left-wing politician; Election Day; interest / exchange / growth⁶ / inflation / morbidity⁷ rate but a rate of increase stock exchange; right-wing politician; stock market; share price; working-class politician, and so on;*

³ *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for Students of English (+ CD-rom)*, 2009^{II}, ISBN 978-0-1943 2538-7.

⁴ *MacMillan Collocations Dictionary*, 2010, ISBN 978-0-2307-2403-7.

⁵ *Longman Collocations Dictionary and Thesaurus*, 2013, ISBN 978-1-4082-5225-3.

⁶ "rate of growth" can also be used.

⁷ The **morbidity rate** is the frequency or proportion with which a disease appears in a population. **Italian equivalent:** "tasso di morbilità", "tasso di diffusione.

- **adj + n** → *incumbent* /ɪn'kʌmbənt/ *candidate; leading politician; developing countries; developed countries; senior politician, and so on;*
- **adv + adj** → *extremely low; increasingly important, and so on;*
- **adv + adv** → *most importantly; most significantly, and so on;*
- **n + v** → with the help of a dictionary of your own, please compare the following sentences: **1)** "The US Congress approved the tax-cutting package" and **2)** "The US Congress passed a series of important measures";
- **v + n** → They *entered politics* in the hope of changing society;
Several new firms *have now entered the market*;
The investigation *has entered a new phase*;
The strike *is entering* its fourth week;
The firm *went out of business* during the recession;
He has no idea how *to run a business*;
The shareholders want more say in how *the company is run*;
It costs more and more *to run this car* each year;
Abby *runs three computers* at the same time in her office;
- **v + adv** → *to increase dramatically; to significantly increase and so on;*

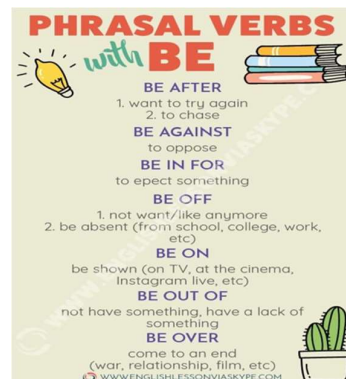
Metaphors and metonymies, as well as phrases containing sound repetition, such as alliteration or paronomasia, are lexical collocation but are referred to as **AESTHETIC COLLOCATIONS** as well by scholars and traditional linguistics:

- *white collars; blue collars; green collars; pink collars; iron/steel collars; pink slips; red goods; orange goods; white goods; brown goods, and so in;*
- *fat cat; golden handshake; golden parachute; ...*
- *to make⁸ a mistake; to make money ...*
- *to face the facts ...*

2) GRAMMATICAL COLLOCATIONS

- **v + preposition** → *to apply for; to depend on; to focus on; to deal with; to look forward to + -ing form; to suffer from; to refer to; to result in and to lead to (= to cause); to result from (= to be caused by); to transfer into ... and all the other so-called prepositional and phrasal verbs:*

⁸ Compare the different collocations where the verb *to make* occurs with those where *to do* is present.



- **adj + preposition** → *interested in; dependent on; independent from, and so on;*
- **linking expressions** → *according to / in accordance with / on the basis of; as well as; as well; such as; due to / because of; in order to; so far / to date, and so on;*
- **definite article + certain toponyms** → *the US, the USA, the United States; the UK, the United Kingdom; the EU, the European Union; the Atlantic Ocean; the Pacific; the Mediterranean; the Suez Canal, and so on;*
- **definite article + certain institutions** → *the London Stock Exchange, the LSE; the London School of Economics and Political Science, the LSE; the World Trade Organization, the WTO; the World Tourism Organization, the WTO, and so on;*
- **definite article in absolute superlative expressions** → *the most competitive; the highest, and so on;*
- **the "fixed" plural forms of U-nouns as suggested by <https://ozdic.com/> at the voice "QUANT."** → *a body of evidence; piece of legislation, and so on.*