1 What is a collocation?

A

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 **fast food**	~~quick~~ cars ~~quick~~ food
a quick glance **a quick meal**	a ~~fast~~ glance 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**.

B

Compounds and idioms

Compounds are units of meaning formed with two or more words. Sometimes the words are written separately, sometimes they have a hyphen and sometimes they are written as one word. Usually the meaning of the compound can be guessed by knowing the meaning of the individual words. Some examples of compounds are **car park**, **post office**, **narrow-minded**, **shoelaces**, **teapot**.

It is not always easy to separate collocations and compounds and, where they are useful for learners or an important part of the vocabulary of a topic, we include some compounds in this book too.

Idioms are groups of words in a fixed order that have a meaning that cannot be guessed by knowing the meaning of the individual words. For example, **pass the buck** is an idiom meaning 'to pass responsibility for a problem to another person to avoid dealing with it oneself'. We deal with idioms in detail in the book *English Idioms in Use* in this series.

C

Why learn collocations?

Learning collocations is a good idea because they can:

a) give you the most natural way to say something: *smoking is **strictly forbidden*** is more natural than *smoking is strongly forbidden*.
b) give you alternative ways of saying something, which may be more colourful/expressive or more precise: instead of repeating *It was **very** cold and **very** dark*, we can say *It was **bitterly cold** and **pitch dark***.
c) improve your style in writing: instead of saying *poverty **causes crime***, you can say *poverty **breeds crime***; instead of saying *a **big meal*** you can say *a **substantial meal***. You may not need or want to use these in informal conversations, but in writing they can give your text more variety and make it read better: this book includes notes about formality wherever the collocations are especially formal or informal.

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Exercises

1.1 Read A and B and answer these questions.

1 What is a collocation?
2 Which of these words does *fast* collocate with: *car*, *food*, *glance*, *meal*?
3 Which of these are compounds: *computer*, *narrow-minded*, *teapot*, *ancient monument*, *car park*?
4 What do we call expressions like *pass the buck* and *be over the moon*?

1.2 Make ten collocations from the words in the box.

an effort	ancient	bitterly	make	breakfast	cold	dark
engine	forbidden	mistakes	have	make	meal	monument
pitch	powerful	strictly	substantial	TV	watch	

1.3 Are these statements about collocations true or false?

1 Learning collocations will make your English sound more natural.
2 Learning collocations will help you to express yourself in a variety of ways.
3 Learning collocations will help you to write better English.
4 Using collocations properly will get you better marks in exams.
5 You will not be understood unless you use collocations properly.

1.4 Put the expressions from the box into the correct category in the table below.

make a mistake	a storm in a tea cup	live music	checkpoint	key ring
pull somebody's leg	heavy snow	valid passport	teapot	bitterly disappointed

compound	collocation	idiom

1.5 Underline the collocations in this text.

When I left university I made a decision to take up a profession in which I could be creative. I could play the guitar, but I'd never written any songs. Nonetheless, I decided to become a singer-songwriter. I made some recordings but I had a rather heavy cold, so they didn't sound good. I made some more, and sent them to a record company and waited for them to reply.
So, while I was waiting to become famous, I got a job in a fast-food restaurant. That was five years ago.
I'm still doing the same job.

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