



## Collocations

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Write the example sentence on the board, leaving a blank for the verb:

The doctor \_\_\_\_\_ a physical examination of the patient.

Ask students to suggest a verb that could fill the gap. Possible answers are *performed*, *conducted*, *carried out*. Discuss why *did* and *made* are not such good choices. (They are less formal and less academic, because they are very vague in terms of meaning. Also *make* does not collocate with *examination* at all; *do* can be used with *examination* in some contexts, but is not common.) Note that many common verbs – *do*, *make*, *get*, *put*, *have*, etc. – are typically avoided in academic writing because they are vague in meaning and could therefore be ambiguous. Longer, Latinate verbs are more typical because they have more clearly defined meanings.

Check that students understand what is meant by **collocation** and why it is important in academic writing.

- 1 For this exercise, students need to focus on the content of the example sentences. The two adjective collocates illustrated are *fundamental* and *important*; the verbs are *blurred*, *recognizes* and *makes*. Ask students to locate these collocations in the collocations section below: what alternative collocations could be used in these examples instead of *fundamental* and *makes*? (*basic*, *draws*)

If students have their dictionaries open at page 243, you could ask them to do a similar exercise with the entry for **distinct** above, looking in the example sentences at senses 1 and 2 for noun collocates of **distinct** (*form*, *group*, *advantage*, *difference*, *possibility*) which can then be found in the collocations section below.

- 2 This exercise gets students to look in depth at the collocations of a particular word and shows them how to use the collocations section to find exactly the right word to express their meaning. Encourage them to write sentences using the collocations on topics from their own discipline or areas of interest where possible.
  - a initial focus
  - b sole or exclusive focus
  - c narrow focus
  - d shift the focus
  - e broaden or widen the focus
  - f emerge as the focus

- 3 Writing questions about collocations, even more than answering them, will really make students think about how these collocations can be used. Encourage students to look up the dictionary entries for any collocations they are unsure about: the definitions can help them to phrase their questions. Choose one of the suggested entries, or another that is relevant to your class, or have different pairs/groups working on different entries.
- 4 Discuss with students what the problem is in the example sentence: *really significant* is not absolutely wrong – in speech it sounds quite natural – but it is too informal in register for academic writing. If students are struggling to identify the non-academic words, spend some time on this stage of the task as a class before getting students to work individually or in pairs to identify better collocations. For most of the questions, there is more than one possible answer.
- a One employer agreed to *undertake/conduct/perform/carry out* a risk **assessment**.
  - b Consumers have **benefited** *greatly/enormously/significantly* from these reforms.
  - c The study clearly showed that reductions in air pollution had a *positive/beneficial* **effect** on health.
  - d Students are *set/assigned* increasingly complex and *demanding/challenging* **tasks**. (*Given* would be acceptable here, although *set/assigned* is more idiomatic; *hard* really does need to change to fit the register. *Difficult* would be acceptable, but *demanding* or *challenging* fits the context better, with the emphasis on testing someone's ability – the Thesaurus note at **difficult** can help here too. *Arduous* is used about physically hard tasks and so is not appropriate here.)
  - e The best **results** *are obtained* with a pH of around 6.5.  
Note that the original sentence was informal not just because it used *get* instead of *obtain*, but in the use of the second person *You get ...* This is best corrected by using a passive construction; the example sentence in the collocations section at **result** should help here.
- 5 – Ask students to read the extract for general comprehension first, ignoring the gaps, and then tell you anything they have understood about the topic and argument of the text – which may not be very much at this stage but key words that they can hopefully pick out are *smoking* and *inequalities*: ask students what they think these inequalities might be.
- Ask students to identify any words in the text they are not sure of and would like to look up (very likely *prevalence, initiation, cessation, legitimise*).
  - Ask them to look at the gaps in the first sentence and identify the parts of speech needed to fill each gap: without looking in the dictionary first of all, can they suggest suitable words to fill each gap?
  - Students look at the collocations sections for **aim**<sup>1</sup> *noun* and **issue**<sup>1</sup> *noun* and check/change the words they chose. (The original text had *central* and *approach* but alternatives such as *main/primary/principal/key* and *address/discuss/consider/explore/examine* are fine.
  - Students work alone or in pairs on the other gaps, using the collocation sections at the **bold** words to help them. Compare answers and discuss which you think are best. The original text is given below, but these are not the only possibilities in all cases.

- Ask students to summarize more precisely the argument of the text. Do they agree that health inequalities caused by smoking are a matter of social justice, because they affect poorer people more than richer people? Or do they believe that smoking is a personal choice and that the consequences for health are a matter of personal responsibility?

The **central** aim of this paper was to **approach** the issue of smoking from the perspective of social justice. In many countries as well as globally, smoking prevalence is **particularly** high among **disadvantaged** groups, and it is likely that these inequalities will widen further. Many of the circumstances faced by the disadvantaged also make smoking initiation more likely and cessation more difficult ... This **challenges** the idea that smoking choices can legitimise the **health** inequalities they cause; the **unequal** distribution of smoking rates should, therefore, also be seen as a problem of social justice.

SOURCE: Voigt, K. (2010). 'Smoking and Social Justice' in *Public Health Ethics* 3 (2): 91-106

### Practice

- 6 Almost any academic text will contain some examples of collocations. Many, though not necessarily all, of these will appear in the dictionary either in example sentences or in collocation sections, or both. For this task, students could find their own texts from their individual disciplines or you could choose sections of texts that you have used in class for students to work on in pairs or groups. Have them look for collocations in particular grammatical relations, such as adjective-noun, verb-noun, adverb-adjective and adverb-verb.

## Collocations

Read the two sentences below. Which sentence do you think sounds more 'academic'? Explain your choice.

*The doctor did a physical examination of the patient.*

*The doctor performed a physical examination of the patient.*

Both verbs, *do* and *perform*, can be used with the noun *examination*; they are both **collocations**. However, *perform* sounds more academic because it has a more precise meaning. **Collocation** is the way words work together to sound natural in a particular context. Collocations are usually pairs of words, for example verb + noun (as in *perform an examination*) or adjective + noun (*a physical examination*). In order to write natural-sounding academic English, it is important to consider questions such as: which is the best verb to use with this noun? Or: which is the best adverb to use with this verb? Your dictionary can help you answer this question in two ways:

- 1 The example sentences often illustrate some of the most important and useful collocations of a word. Identify 2 adjective and 3 verb collocations of **distinction** in the example sentences at sense 1.

**distinction** **AWL** /drɪ'stɪŋkʃn/ *noun* **1** [C] a clear difference, especially between people or things that are similar or related: *These distinctions are often blurred in the literature.* ◇ ~ **between A and B** *The Companies Act 2006 recognizes a distinction between two different types of company.* ◇ *Jaworski makes a fundamental distinction between formal and informal control systems.* ◇ *There is an important distinction between internal energy on the one hand, and heat and work on the other.* **2** [U] the div-

For 690 of the most important academic words, a special section at the end of the entry lists collocations with different parts of speech.

► **ADJECTIVE + DISTINCTION** **important** • **key** • **crucial** • **clear** • **sharp** • **fundamental** • **basic** • **fine** • **traditional** • **useful** • **conceptual** *Table 10.2 indicates the key distinctions between the supervisory board and the management board.* ◇ *Professionals draw fairly clear distinctions between traditional and modern irrigation systems.*  
► **VERB + DISTINCTION** **make** • **draw** • **note** • **blur** • **maintain** • **introduce** • **recognize** • **emphasize** *Gronroos (1981) draws a distinction between what he sees as the strategic and tactical levels of internal marketing.* ◇ *Developments in computer technology in the late 1990s further blurred the distinction between hardware and software.*

- 2 Look at the collocations section at the entry for **focus**<sup>2</sup> *noun*.

Find an adjective that means:

- a the focus that you had in the beginning
- b your only focus, not including anything else
- c a focus that is limited in extent or range

Find a verb or verb phrase that means:

- d to move the focus onto something else
- e to make the focus include more things
- f to appear as the focus of something

Now write a sentence using each collocation.

- 3 Choose one of these entries in the dictionary: **challenge**<sup>1</sup> *noun*, **culture**<sup>1</sup> *noun*, **environment**, **fact**, **method**, **range**<sup>1</sup> *noun*. Look at the collocations section. Write 3-5 questions about the collocations, like those in exercise 2. Swap questions with another student and try to answer each other's questions. Write a sentence using each collocation.
- 4 Read each of these sentences and identify a word or phrase in each that does not sound very academic. Rewrite each sentence, using a more academic collocation. Use the collocation section for the word in **bold** in your dictionary to help you.

Example: These differences are really **significant**.

*These differences are highly significant.*

- a One employer agreed to do a risk **assessment**.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- b Consumers have **benefited** a lot from these reforms.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- c The study clearly showed that reductions in air pollution had a good **effect** on health.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- d Students are given increasingly complex and hard **tasks**.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- e You get the best **results** with a pH of around 6.5.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 5 a Read this extract from the conclusion of a journal article about smoking and social inequality. Ignore the gaps. Explain to a partner what you think the link between smoking and social inequality might be.
- b Some of the collocations have been removed from the text. First identify which type of word is needed in each gap, e.g. a verb, an adjective, etc. Then use the collocations sections in the entries for the words in **bold** to find suitable words to fill the gaps.

The \_\_\_\_\_ **aim** of this paper was to \_\_\_\_\_ the **issue** of smoking from the perspective of social justice. In many countries as well as globally, smoking prevalence is \_\_\_\_\_ **high** among \_\_\_\_\_ **groups**, and it is likely that these inequalities will widen further. Many of the circumstances faced by the disadvantaged also make smoking initiation more likely and cessation more difficult ... This \_\_\_\_\_ the **idea** that smoking choices can legitimise the \_\_\_\_\_ **inequalities** they cause; the \_\_\_\_\_ **distribution** of smoking rates should, therefore, also be seen as a problem of social justice.

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## Practice

- 6 Find a short text in your own discipline and identify some collocations used in it. Are they shown in the dictionary? Remove one word from each collocation and swap texts with another student. Use the dictionary to fill in the gaps.