

## The Power of Collocations

### Introduction

Having a large vocabulary is a highly effective way to improve your TOEIC, TOEFL and IELTS score, as well as your overall English ability. However, memorizing many new words is not only boring and difficult, but often also time-consuming. An alternative approach is to combine learning some new words with learning to use the vocabulary you already know more easily, effectively and naturally. Learning collocations is a great way to do this.

What are collocations? Basically, collocations —also known as ‘word combinations’ — are a pair or group of words that are often used together by native speakers in the same sentence or phrase. Collocations are often combinations like **verb + noun** or **adjective + noun**. Some common examples of collocations are ‘catch a cold’, ‘catch a bus’ and ‘catch something that somebody said’. You can see that all of these examples use the same verb, ‘catch’ but a different object (noun).

### How Are Collocations Different from Expressions or Idioms?

Expressions (sometimes also called ‘fixed expressions’ or phrases) and idioms are like collocations in many ways. The words in expressions and idioms are used together, for example, and all native speakers know them and use them. However, the difference between an idiom and a collocation is that an idiom or expression is usually fixed – the same words must be used in the same order – but a collocation tends to be unfixed – the same words can be used in any order, and different words can also be used. Look at this example:

*Idiom* I’m not sure what time I will finish today, so let’s **play it by ear** this evening.

*Collocation* I’ll probably finish early today, so do you want to **catch a movie** this evening?

The first example is an idiom – **play something by ear** – which means to make a decision about something later, depending on the current situation at that time. This idiom is quite common, but we cannot change any of the words (except possibly ‘it’) or change the order of the words. The second example is an informal collocation – **catch a movie** – which means to go to the cinema and watch a film. This collocation is also quite common, but unlike the idiom we can change the order of the words or use different vocabulary. For example:

*Collocation* I’ll probably finish early today, so do you want to **catch a movie** this evening?

*or* ----- **catch a film** -----?

*or* ----- **watch a movie** -----?

*or* ----- **see a film** -----?

*or* ----- **go to a film** -----?

*or even* Surprisingly, I cannot remember the name of the **movie we caught** last week.



## The Power of Collocations

### Collocations for Writing and Speaking Tests Like TOEFL, IELTS and TOEIC

Look at these pairs of example sentences below. Which sentence from each pair (A) or (B) sounds the most natural to you?

- (A) This essay will say the reasons of my opinion in more detail.  
(B) This essay will explain the reasons for my opinion in more detail.
- (A) Reading the Internet, to tell an example, is a popular hobby among young people.  
(B) Surfing the Internet, to give an example, is a popular hobby among young people.
- (A) In addition, the man firmly thinks that the university's plan has weak areas.  
(B) In addition, the man strongly believes that the university's plan has weak points.
- (A) The diagram proves several factors that have had an effect about oil prices recently.  
(B) The diagram shows several factors that have had an impact on oil prices recently.
- (A) In conclusion, I could prefer to take a vacation overseas to lose my stress.  
(B) In conclusion, I would prefer to take a vacation overseas to reduce my stress.

Like with the previous exercise, some of the questions were probably difficult for you and you spent some time thinking about the choices. For native speakers, all of these questions were very easy because all of the correct sentences – in each case the answer is actually the second choice (B) – contain two examples of collocations. If you can learn these collocations, you can see that you would be able to write or speak more naturally, more accurately, and, because you do not have to think about which expression is more natural, more quickly. By learning collocations, you will therefore **increase your writing and speaking test scores and save your time**.

### From Where Can I Learn Collocations?

This is actually the most difficult aspect of learning collocations – where to find good examples. Of course, there are hundreds of examples of collocations in every English document. For example, in the first paragraph of this article there are four common collocations – highly effective, an alternative approach, combining A with B, a great way. The problem is that non-native speakers can recognize these expressions as collocations. Therefore, the best approach is to buy a collocations dictionary and begin using it to improve your vocabulary. After you have the dictionary, you can also read newspaper articles or other sources of English and check the dictionary to see if a phrase is a useful collocation that you should learn. To find out which collocation dictionaries are available in your country, do an Internet search for “collocations dictionary” and you should find the best ones available.

Good luck!

## The Power of Collocations

**This article is provided as a free service to all test preparation students by Higher Score, Canada's number one test preparation centre.**

**Students are welcome to send copies of this article to other students who are taking a test. However, this article may not be distributed in any other way without the express written consent of Higher Score.**