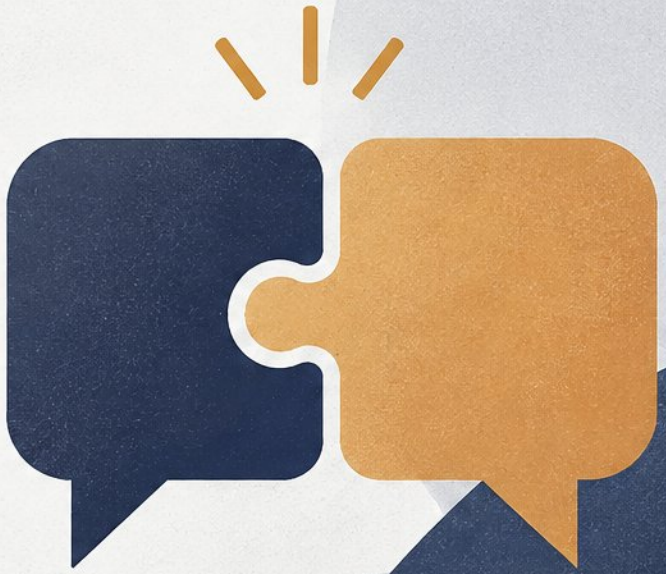
Collocations:

Words That Naturally Go Together

- Your grammar is solid — now choose words that sound natural together.
- Collocations are conventional partnerships: make a decision, heavy rain, strongly recommend.
- “Correct but translated” English slows listeners down and sounds non-native.
- Map: notice collocations in input, record them, then use them under time pressure.
- Goal: sound natural, not just correct.



The Naturalness Gap: Why 'Correct' Can Still Sound Wrong

Your grammar is solid — yet English can still sound 'translated'.

Three causes of unnatural word choice:

- **First-language transfer:** word-for-word translation from your native language
- **Near-synonym confusion:** make vs. do, say vs. tell
- **Overgeneralization:** extending a valid pattern too far

Classic mismatches:

- "do a decision" → make a decision
- "strong rain" → heavy rain
- "say an opinion" → express an opinion



> Most errors cluster in the **'restricted middle zone'** — between free combinations and fixed idioms.

Self-check: Have I seen this pairing in real texts? Does the simpler, familiar option sound right?

What Counts as a Collocation?
Patterns and Types

- Core patterns: verb + noun (take a risk), adjective + noun (a strong argument)



take a risk



a strong argument

- More patterns: adverb + adjective (highly unlikely), noun + noun (a business meeting)



highly unlikely



a business meeting

- Also notice: verb + adverb (apologize profusely), verb + preposition (depend on)



apologize profusely



depend on

- Boundaries: free combinations (eat a sandwich), restricted collocations (make a mistake), fixed idioms (kick the bucket)



eat a sandwich



make a mistake



kick the bucket

- Tricky cases: delexical verbs (have a rest), phrasal verbs (come up with a suggestion), compound nouns (job interview)



have a rest

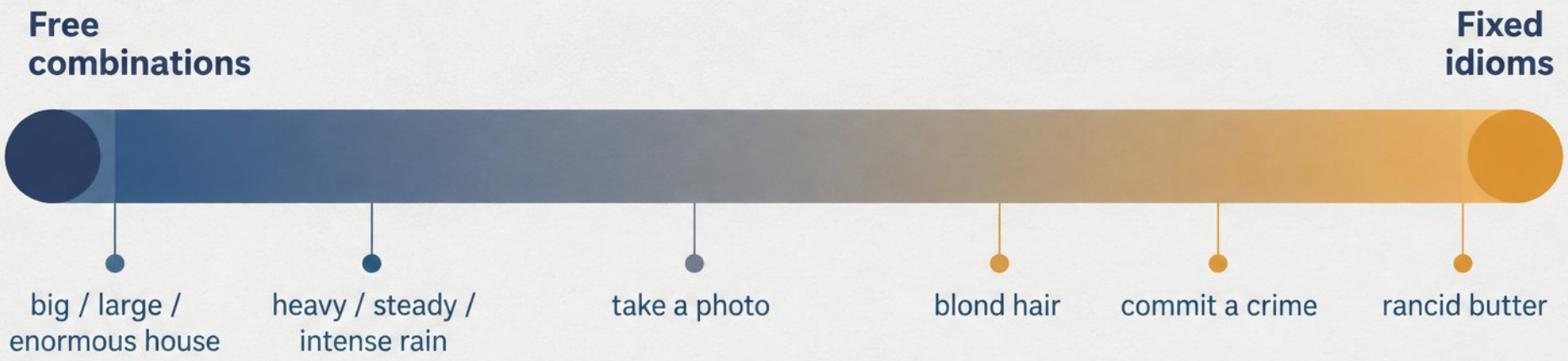


come up with a suggestion



job interview

Strong, Weak, and Fixed:
How Tight Is the Partnership?



- Collocations form a spectrum, from fully fixed to loose and flexible
- Strong partnerships allow few substitutes: rancid butter, blond hair, commit a crime, take a photo
- Weak partnerships accept many alternatives: big / large / enormous house; heavy / steady / intense rain
- Most collocations sit somewhere in the middle of this continuum
- Learn strong collocations as whole units; experiment freely with weak ones

Noticing Collocations in Real Input

BETTER WORDS BRIGHTER IDEAS

- Read and listen with a collocation lens: notice the words that keep company
- Ask: which verb, which adjective, which preposition goes with this word?
- High-value input: emails, news summaries, reports, podcasts, subtitled video
- Meaning first: understand the message, then notice the partnership
- Task: find three verb + noun and two adjective + noun chunks; record each in context

The team **launched** a new **initiative** this week to improve customer experience. The report highlights a **significant** **increase** in engagement and a growing demand for clearer communication. We aim to **build** stronger **relationships** and deliver **better** **service** in the months ahead.



REAL INPUT
REAL LANGUAGE
REAL PROGRESS

Recording Collocations So They Stick

1. Head each entry with the node word: decision → make, reach, tough
2. Organize by topic, by pattern, or by verb family (make, do, take)
3. Never record single words — store the full chunk in a personal sentence
4. Review after 2 days, 5 days, 2 weeks, 4 weeks; short self-tests beat long sessions
5. Avoid overloading lists, copying items twice, and never revisiting



Everyday, Workplace, and Academic Collocations

Common word partnerships for real-life communication



WORDS
WORK
TOGETHER

Everyday

- book a table
- deeply disappointed
- make progress

Workplace

- set an agenda
- raise a concern
- meet a deadline

Academic

- conduct research
- draw a distinction
- provide evidence

Register

have a chat (informal) → have a discussion → conduct a discussion (formal)

Common Trouble Spots and Fixes

- **Direct translation traps:**
  assist to a meeting → attend a meeting

  ✗ assist to a meeting → ✓ attend a meeting

- **Delexical verbs (make, do, take, have, get, give):**
  learn each verb + noun as a pair

  ✗ make a decision → ✓ take a decision

- **Overgeneralization:**
  make an exam → take an exam
  (one pattern ≠ all)

  ✗ make an exam → ✓ take an exam

- **Near-synonyms:**
  say a word, but tell a story;
  make a mistake, but commit a crime

  ✗ say a story → ✓ tell a story

- **Preposition pitfalls:**
  depend on, interested in, responsible for, good at, congratulate someone on

  ✗ congratulate someone in → ✓ congratulate someone on

Using Collocations Under Pressure

Retrieval drills:
supply the natural partner fast — reach a ___, deeply ___, meet a ___, raise a ___

Reformulation:
if a phrase sounds off, pause and switch to a safer, familiar partnership

Speaking frames:
"I'd like to raise a concern about…", "Could we set a deadline for…"

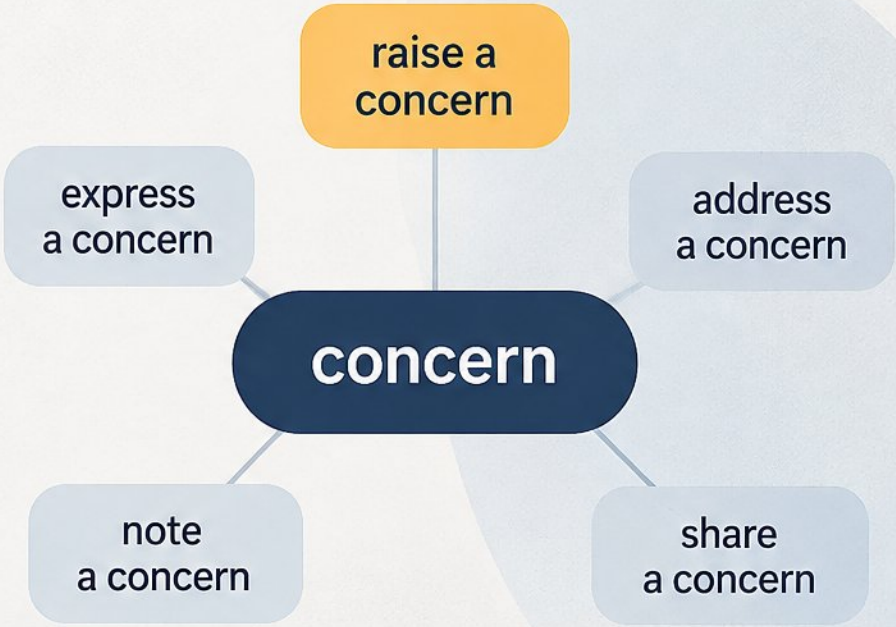
Chunk-based fluency:
memorized partnerships free up attention and reduce pauses

Writing check:
scan emails and reports for delexical verbs and prepositions before sending



Checking Collocations with Dictionaries and Corpora

- Use collocation dictionaries, not standard definitions alone
- Free tools: SKELL Word Sketch, CorpusMate, ICNALE Online, 7ESL Finder
- Start from the node word; use wildcards like assess*
- Scan example sentences and compare frequency across options
- Worked check: compare “raise a concern” with alternatives before writing
- Make it a habit, not a one-off classroom exercise



Practical Strategies for Independent Learning



Turn reading, listening, and work email into a personal collocation bank

Learn 5–8 items deeply each week, not long lists

Say each partnership aloud; use it three times this week

Round-trip test: translate to L1, wait, translate back

Revisit your portfolio: mark what's confident and what needs work

Putting It All Together: Rapid Review

WORDS WORK BETTER TOGETHER



Match verbs to nouns:

- make a decision
- do homework
- take a break

Match adjectives to nouns:

- heavy rain
- strong coffee
- high standards

Match adverbs to adjectives:

- deeply concerned
- highly unlikely
- bitterly disappointed

Odd one out:

- make homework — we say *do* homework

Fix these:

- did a big mistake, strong rain, interested about, depend of

SMALL CHANGES BIGGER COMMUNICATION

Your One-Week Collocation Action Plan

- Choose three target collocations tied to your work or study
- Use each one in speaking and writing at least three times
- Set review dates now: day 2, day 5, day 14
- Pick one daily input source: work email, news summary, podcast
- Keep noticing, recording, and returning to trouble spots



Wrap-Up, Self-Assessment, and Next Steps

PRACTICE BUILDS FLUENCY

I now use confidently

_____

Still needs work

_____

Back your judgment with evidence:
a recording, revised sentence, quiz result

Keep the routine going:

notice → record → retrieve → use → recycle

Continue with *English Collocations in Use* (B1–C1) or a free collocation dictionary

Closing message:
your grammar already works; collocations make it sound like English

SMALL STEPS BIGGER PROGRESS

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