

# Helping writers with academic English collocations

Ana Frankenberg-Garcia provides help with word combinations

## What are collocations?

I am going to start this article by asking you to do the gap-fill exercise below. When you finish, carry on reading.

### Fill in the gaps.

1. The contradiction was not \_\_\_\_\_ apparent.
2. They had to \_\_\_\_\_ the activities of each group.
3. The system has been \_\_\_\_\_ adopted in the UK.
4. The results are \_\_\_\_\_ in Table 3.
5. There was a \_\_\_\_\_ increase \_\_\_\_\_ prices.
6. Based \_\_\_\_\_ previous research, we conclude that...

You will have noticed that the gapped sentences are typically used in academic English, and that more than one word can fit most gaps, except the last two, which need prepositions. The gaps are designed to test your recall of academic English collocations. Loosely defined, you could say collocations are words which sound just right together, like 'immediately apparent', 'monitor activities', or 'increase in prices'. While it is straightforward to tell learners when they get a proposition wrong, like \*'increase of prices', it is harder to explain why 'slight increase' sounds so much better than 'light increase'. The difference between the two is that the former collocation occurs very frequently in academic English, whereas the latter is a free combination of words we are less likely to have heard before. We can check this using corpus linguistics: there are 97 occurrences of 'slight increase' in the 85-million word Oxford Corpus of Academic English, compared to just one occurrence of 'light increase'.

## How collocations affect reading and writing

Compare the following two sentences:

- Fine use of collocations can highly improve readability.
  - Effective use of collocations can greatly improve readability.
- There are only two small differences between these sentences ('fine use' vs 'effective use' and 'highly improve' vs 'greatly improve')



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vs 'greatly improve'), yet the second sentence seems much easier to read. This is because familiarity with English will enable you to read the collocations 'effective use' and 'greatly improve' as a single chunk, instead of putting two separate words together. Known word combinations like these are processed with less effort and make texts more readable. Writing will also be easier if you don't have to stop to think of an appropriate collocation. For example, if you can recall a collocation like 'widely adopted' as a chunk without having to ask yourself what adverb could be used before 'adopted', you can free your memory to concentrate on other aspects of your writing.

## Collocations, language learning and academic English

There is a wide body of evidence showing that collocations are notably difficult for second language (L2) learners. Problems include not only errors like \*'increase of prices' and atypical word combinations like 'light increase', but also less-visible issues. Language learners have a limited collocation repertoire to draw on, tend to overuse a restricted set of collocations, are known to avoid collocations they feel less confident about, and may have misconceived perceptions about which word combinations sound better together.

Collocations can be particularly problematic when first language (L1) and L2 collocations clash. For example, \*'increase of prices' is a direct translation of the perfectly acceptable Portuguese collocation 'subida de preços'. However, even L1 users may find collocations

challenging, especially when dealing with a new register that they have not yet mastered. For example, undergraduates may experience difficulties using collocations when writing university essays.

Academic English has its own set of collocations, which may not entirely coincide with the collocations people are normally exposed to in general English. For example, the noun 'table' is often preceded by the preposition 'on' in general English, but in academic English it is usually preceded by the preposition 'in' (see Figure 1).

## Teaching academic English collocations

There are numerous resources to help learners with academic English collocations. Textbooks like *Academic Vocabulary in Use* and *Focus on Vocabulary: Mastering the Academic Word List* have specific sections raising awareness of collocations and exercises to practise using them. General English dictionaries like the *Macmillan English Dictionary* and more specific ones like the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English* are also very helpful. However, people tend to use dictionaries mainly to look up meanings or translations. It is important to encourage learners to look up words whose meaning they already know, and show them how to navigate entries to find information on collocation and examples of how to use words in context. There are also specific collocation dictionaries that novice writers can consult. The *Longman Collocations Dictionary and Thesaurus* includes an appendix with over 2,400 academic English collocations. Learners can also look up collocations in corpus tools like SKELL (Sketch Engine for English Language Learning), which

General English	Academic English
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Every option must remain on the table.</li> <li>• She sat the table and began breakfast.</li> <li>• Her right hand was lying casually on the table.</li> <li>• Your task is to clear the table.</li> <li>• Received a table of 5 for lunch on Saturday.</li> <li>• It's a more lucrative sidekick than waiting tables.</li> <li>• Mary sat with her elbows on the kitchen table.</li> <li>• She placed the tray on the bedside table and poured the tea.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The final coding system is listed in Table 1.</li> <li>• Overall results are shown in Table 42.</li> <li>• Various organisms isolated are shown in Table 3.</li> <li>• The results are reported in Table 3.</li> <li>• The rate constant k is given in Table 15.</li> <li>• The data is summarized in Table 3.</li> <li>• The results are reproduced in Table 2.</li> <li>• The general logistic models are presented in Table 2.</li> </ul>

Figure 1: 'Table' in general and academic English.

can be used without any training in corpus linguistics.

While these are all excellent references, looking up collocations during writing can interrupt writers' thoughts and flow of words. Moreover, learners tend to overestimate their knowledge of collocations, so cannot look up collocations if they are not aware of their own limitations. With this in mind, we developed ColloCaid.

## ColloCaid

ColloCaid is a free text editing tool (available at [www.collocaid.uk](http://www.collocaid.uk)) that helps writers expand their academic English collocation repertoire as they write. It provides reminders and suggestions of collocations that writers don't recall, use less frequently, don't feel confident enough to use or are even unreasonably avoiding. The tool operates on the principle of data-driven learning, where collocations are shown rather than explained. Writers get multiple examples of collocations in context to boost their confidence in using them. Words with collocations suggestions are underlined in green so that writers can follow them up if they wish to. When clicked, collocations are presented through interactive menus, so that writers see the strongest collocations first but can easily navigate to more collocations of the same type and to examples of collocations in context, should the need arise.

ColloCaid covers the most frequently used general academic English words, selected from a combination of well-known academic word lists, and offers over 32,000 collocation suggestions curated from corpora of expert academic English. The examples in ColloCaid have also been selected from corpora of expert writing but have been edited to ensure they are short and easy to read, so that they don't take up too much screen space and writers can focus on their writing.

ColloCaid was conceived for writers who wish to improve their use of academic English collocations autonomously. However, it can also be used in teaching.

For example, learners can be asked to do collocation gap-filling exercises on ColloCaid, as a controlled way of raising collocation awareness. Teachers can use ColloCaid to draw attention to word combinations that make academic texts more fluent, and to show which word governs a collocation. For example, in the sentence 'The system has been \_\_\_\_\_ adopted in the UK', the word that governs the collocation gap is 'adopted', not 'system'. Teachers can also use controlled sentences to show differences between collocations where a noun is used as subject of the clause (e.g. activity + 'generate') and where the same noun is used as object of the clause (e.g. 'undertake' + activity).

Another exercise would be to ask learners to copy onto ColloCaid sentences with weak or odd word combinations, so that they can look up better solutions. Our database of common collocation errors and other issues found widely and frequently in English academic writing (available from [www.collocaid.uk](http://www.collocaid.uk)) can be used to create collocation improvement exercises for learners. The database was compiled using learner corpora and information available from textbooks and dictionaries. It includes problems and solutions for the following (see Figure 3):

1. Lexical choice (e.g. 'accept to pay' > 'agree to pay')
2. Preposition choice (e.g. 'in the one hand' > 'on the one hand')
3. Collocation use: countability (e.g. 'give an advice' > 'give advice')
4. Collocation use: gerund/infinitive (e.g. 'ability of using' > 'ability to use')

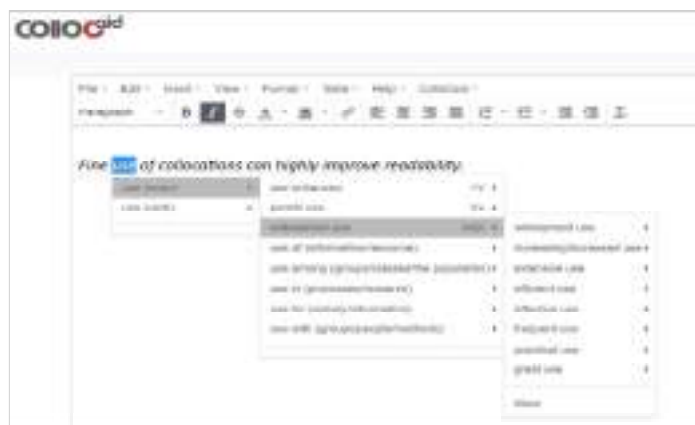


Figure 3: Using ColloCaid to improve collocation choices.

### 5. Collocation use: formality (e.g. 'a bit small' > 'rather small')

Once learners become familiar with ColloCaid, they can write directly or paste a previously written draft onto it. Meanwhile, teachers can use ColloCaid as a quick collocation reference when marking student assignments. It is important to note that our prototype does not correct spelling or grammar, as our focus is on collocation alone.

The ColloCaid editor is free, works online and is compatible with multiple devices and operating systems. Texts written on ColloCaid are private – we do not see or store them. To save drafts, they must be downloaded to your computer or copied onto your regular text editor.

A 2-minute video demo of ColloCaid is available on <http://www.collocaid.uk/what-are/>. Further details and research publications about ColloCaid can be also found on our website.

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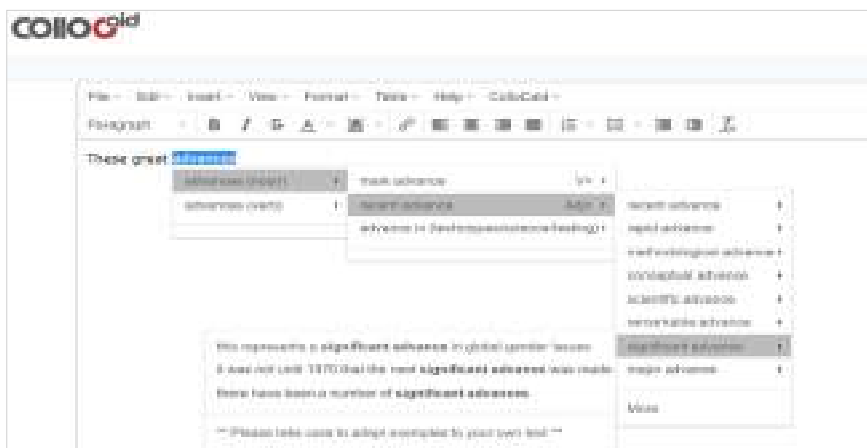


Figure 2: Interactive menus on the ColloCaid editor.