Collocations

Overview

Collocation is a way in which some words are often used together, and sound natural together. This also refers to restrictions on how words may be used together, such as which verbs and nouns can be used together, and which prepositions and verbs can be used together.

For Example: We often say heavy rain, or light rain, instead of strong rain or mild rain, heavy goes well with rain, whereas strong does not. This sort of language behaviour is called collocation. There are many cases in English when it is difficult to know which words go well with the word you want to use, because there are no clear rules. Some words just sound right together, while others do not.

Verbs that Collocate with Nouns

When you use a noun in a sentence, you need to know which verbs go well with it. Learners often make mistakes with these verbs. For example:

- Instead of saying do a bath; you say take a bath
- Instead of do an effort; you say make an effort
- Instead of do a crime; you say commit a crime
- Instead of say a joke, you say tell a joke, make a joke, or crack a joke

Adverbs that Collocate with Adjectives

For example, there are a number of intensifying adverbs that can be used instead of very or extremely with adjectives, such as:

- highly controversial (= very controversial)
  - highly = adverb & controversial = adjective
- deeply offended (= very offended)
- bitterly disappointed (= very disappointment)

Often it is difficult to predict which adverb will be used with a particular adjective. Some adverbs occur quite often before some adjectives, e.g. perfectly normal (same as very normal) and grossly misleading (same as very…).

- bitterly ashamed / disappointed / cold NOT bitterly successful
• highly successful / accomplished NOT highly divided / grateful
• deeply divided / grateful / unpopular NOT deeply developed

Adjectives that Collocate with Nouns
When you want to describe a noun, there is often a range of adjectives you can use, e.g. you can say a strong, real, or distinct possibility when something is very possible, or a remote or faint possibility if something is not very likely.

Practice Exercises

Exercise 1
Choose which one of the following verbs (Miss, Get, Do and Make) goes well with the expressions below:

a) _____________ a goal  
b) _____________ peace  
c) _____________ lost  
d) _____________ a home  
e) _____________ an appointment  
f) _____________ a lesson  
g) _____________ homework  
h) _____________ the cooking  
i) _____________ ready  
j) _____________ progress  
k) _____________ someone’s help  
l) _____________ nothing  
m) _____________ an effort  
n) _____________ one’s best  
o) _____________ furniture  
p) _____________ the shopping  
q) _____________ trouble  
r) _____________ someone a favour

Exercise 2
Decide which word or phrase completes the sentence.

1. He didn't know anything about business, so starting his own business was ________.
   a) a leap into the cloud  
   b) a leap in the dark  
   c) a leap into the whole

2. I hate the way he criticizes everybody. It really rattles __________
   a) my back  
   b) my bones  
   c) my cage

3. When her business crashed, she had to pick up ______ and start again.
   a) the fragments  
   b) the pieces  
   c) the stones
She felt sad when she realized that she had lost her watch. It wasn't expensive but it had sentimental ______.

d) expense
e) price
f) value

4. I used to go to church under false _____. I never wanted to go but my mother made me.
   a) agreements
   b) feelings
   c) pretences

5. One minute they were just talking and then all hell broke ______ and everybody started screaming and shouting.
   a) free
   b) loose
   c) over

6. He never cheats or tricks anybody when he plays. He always goes by the ______.
   a) book
   b) instructions
   c) principles

7. Don't tell Mary your plans or she'll tell everybody. She is always ______ her mouth off.
   a) shooting
   b) speaking
   c) talking

8. Tom might be able to help with your problem. He has friends in high ______ who might be able to change the decision.
   a) jobs
   b) places
   c) spots

Answers

Exercise 1

a) make  
d) get  
g) do  
j) make  
m) make  
p) do
b) make  
e) make  
h) do  
k) get  
n) do  
q) make
c) get  
f) get  
i) get  
l) do  
o) get  
r) do

Exercise 2

1. b  
2. b  
3. b  
4. c  
5. c  
6. b  
7. a  
8. a  
9. b