DukeWrites Enrichment Suite

COCA: Exploring collocations
(how some words work well together)
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Hi, I'm Rene Caputo, ESL specialist with Duke University's Thompson Writing Program. In this tutorial, we'll explore how you can use COCA, the Corpus of Contemporary American English, to see what words seem to work well together.

These words that work well together and are often used together can be called collocates. The beginning of that word simply means together or with. And the end means located. So, collocates are words that are often located with each other, used together.

For our first search, let's imagine that you or someone you are supporting used the word *researches* as a plural noun. Some US professors consider researches in the plural form as formal and correct. But other professors think it sounds a bit awkward. In fact, some academic writing textbooks suggest that you do not use an "s" with the noun research.

So, let's imagine you're writing for one of those professors who doesn't like researches as a noun. Let's use COCA to find some other way to express that feeling of the plural.

In the search field, I will type research. And in Parts of Speech ~ I want to know what plural nouns could work with that. [Chooses noun.PL from the Parts for Speech drop down menu.] After the word research in the search field, we want a blank space, so I'm going to add that. And under sections, [I'm] going to choose Academic, so we'll have academic sources in our results.

And click on Find matching strings. When we get these results, we'll see some nouns that are plural that go with research, that are collocates of research and have that feeling of plurality for your paper. So, we have research questions, findings, studies, projects, methods, interests. And at the top we see what is most frequently seen in COCA. And as you go down, less frequently.

Let's imagine that **research findings** is what fits the context of your paper and look at a few examples. So, here are some excerpts with **research findings** from articles from scholars. We have: research findings are aimed at, related to, implementing research findings into practice, into practice. So, you can look either before or after those highlighted words ~ or both ~ to look for patterns of language.

But you can do this another way also. Let's go back to search. And you've decided that **research findings** matches the context that you're looking for ~ and you're considering what verbs might be used after that. [From the Parts of Speech drop down menu, chooses verb.ALL+].

Again, we want a space between research findings and the VERB. And find matching strings. So, here we can see: research findings are, have, suggest, indicate. Those are the top four most frequently used collocates ~ are, have, suggest, indicate ~ with research findings in COCA.

But next we see research findings is. And this is interesting ~ and it's a good thing to see. Research findings is sounds as if the subject and the verb do not agree. And that's a good reminder that COCA is a collection of published ~ well, this part of the collection we're looking at ~ academic sources. And we do not know that every single source is correct, so keep that in mind. [Note: you can say **research findings is** and have that be correct if you're talking about that term "research findings" rather than discussing the actual research results.]

If you wanted to use research findings suggest, you could just click on that. And again, you could see some examples. And you could look for patterns of language use. So, suggest that, suggest that the facts, suggest that the humanities, suggest that repeated reading methods. So, what I'm seeing here is we usually have that, and we often then have a noun or an article and a noun.

Let's go back to search one more time, just so you can review what that looked like, the setup for that search. Research findings plus verbs ~ from the Parts of Speech menu over here. And in sections, we chose Academic sources.

Let's try one more search here, because one of the things that's often difficult is finding the appropriate preposition to follow a word. So, in this space here, I'm going to put focus. And over here, we're looking for prepositions. And that is PREP. [Note: prep.ALL in the POS menu becomes PREP in the search field.]

We want a blank space after the word focus and before PREP. And find matching strings. So, we see focus on, focus of, focus for, focus in. Those are the top four. Now, in this collection, this collection of results that we have here, focus is sometimes a noun and sometimes a verb, so you want to keep that in mind. In our fifth COCA tutorial, I'll show you another kind of way to use COCA to find collocates of a word where you can decide if you're looking for focus as a noun or focus as a verb.

But let's look at that search one more time, the setup, so you can see what it looked like. We're doing a list search, which is the default in COCA. We searched for focus plus prepositions from the parts of speech [menu]. And we made sure to have a blank space between focus and PREP in the search cell. And below, in sections, we have academic sources chosen, so that the results would all be academic.

In our tutorial today, we've examined how you can use COCA to look at what words might work together, of how writers use particular words together ~ collocates. I hope you'll try some searches and experiment with these possibilities on your own!