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. To examine the language usage of other writers.

For our first search, let's imagine that you or someone you are helping used the word *researches* as a plural noun in a paper. And the comment from the professor was that this use of researches as a plural noun sounded a bit awkward for U.S. English. That we would normally use it as a non-count noun. How could we use COCA to help improve this language usage?

Let's start by typing *research* here in our search field. And we're going to treat that as an adjective in this search. So the question is: What noun or nouns could work as a plural noun to create that plural context for the paper that the writer wanted to have.

Here we have POS and that means Parts of Speech. We are going to scroll down to the nouns section and choose Noun PL or plural nouns and do our search.

We immediately get this page that says no matches! Well, this unfortunately is a programming bug or a programming error of the current version of COCA. But no problem, we're going to go back to the search. This is still a great tool ~ and it's free, right? So, we're going to go back to the search. And after the word research, we're going to add one blank space ~ and search again.

Now we can see that the most common use of a plural noun with research in this database is research questions. But really what you want to consider is: What is the context in the paper that's being written? And which of these matches that context the best? Perhaps we might consider research projects or research studies.

We can click on research projects and see some of the examples of that usage. So we have: current research projects, doctoral research projects, highly focused university research projects.

On the left, we have the year, the genre (spoken, fiction, magazine) and the more specific source. If we scroll down, we certainly have plenty of academic examples.

But if you only want to look at academic examples, we can go back to our search. And "Sections" is where you can see the genres. And we can choose Academic and search again.

And now all we have are the academic results. So, let's take a look at research studies, since that seems like another possible phrase that would work for us.

So we have: decades of research studies, an avenue for future research studies, the number of research studies, and prior research studies. Remember we can go over here, anywhere in this Click for More Context section and see a little more information. So on the top here, we have more information about the source and below, a lot more context for prior research studies.

So that's one way to use COCA to find words that work well together. Let's move on to another search. We're going to go back to the search page and click on reset. That'll clear all that older information out for us.

One of the things that is challenging when you're moving from one language to another is the use of prepositions. And for our second example, therefore, let's imagine that you or someone you are helping with a paper has written this phrase: *people are dreaming with a better life*.

And the professor responds by highlighting the word **with** and saying *dreaming with a better life* is awkward for English. Now depending on your primary or native language, with a better life might be perfect.

Dreaming with might be perfect. I know of several Romance languages where that would be considered correct. And possibly that's true for other languages as well. But for U.S. English, that doesn't work so well, so let's go in here and try to find some answers.

We're looking for *dreaming*. And we want something to replace **with**, which is a preposition. So we know that this is "Parts of Speech." And here we have Prep, which means prepositions. And let's do that search.

And here we are again with our notification that there are no matches for our search. Well, the good thing is you know what to do this time, right?

We're going to the end of dreaming, we're adding one blank space, and we're doing the search again. So, we can see here that the two most common results are dreaming of and dreaming about.

We have other choices including dreaming with. If you're curious, you could look at those and see how the context there might be different from the idea that was expressed by the writer [who received the "awkward" comment from the professor]. But for right now, it seems like the wisest choice might be to explore the top two.

So let's click on dreaming of. So here we have: dreaming of becoming a writer, dreaming of opportunities, dreaming of floating. The dreaming of opportunities sounds very similar to our idea.

Now remember we have various sources here. If we want, we can narrow this to Academic. Or you can scroll down even further and look at the subcategories of Academic.

But for right now, let's just try this. Again, dreaming of and dreaming about are the two most popular. So let's check out dreaming about. And here we have: dreaming about a better world. So that sounds very similar to our idea. Also we have dreaming about life, dreaming about improving it.

So on the left here, we can click on the source and get more context for dreaming about and also ~ if you're interested ~ get more information on that source. So that is another search that you might find useful, particularly prepositions. Again, often a challenge as we're moving from one language to another and typically something that writers might struggle with. So here you have a place to go and investigate that.

We are going to one more search. So you know already we're going to click on Reset. And this search is going to look a bit different from the previous two. I'm going to type **dreaming** and **an asterisk** and **a better**. We don't really need the noun at the end ~ that won't really change this that much. So the asterisk represents the word we're looking for: dreaming asterisk (*) a better.   And we're going to ask for matching.

And so we have of and about again. So, dreaming of a better is in our results and dreaming about a better. Let's just look at the top ones here. So we have: dreaming of a better country, dreaming of a better place, dreaming of a better world, dreaming of a better life, and dreaming of a better future. You could go back and also look at the other example of dreaming about.

So that just gives you an idea of ways in which you can use COCA to look at possibilities of how words work together, how writers have used language in the past.

I hope you'll try some searches and experiment with these possibilities on your own. And that's it for now. Bye!