

Ask about English

"Well and truly"



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Katie Burton working in China asks:

Some of my Chinese colleagues asked me about the phrase 'well and truly'. We can say 'well and truly stuck' but not 'well and truly beautiful'. Are there any rules for using this phrase or is it just a case of learning it? Is well and truly an adverb and what should follow it, or is it an adjective and is it only for negative things?

Karen Adams answers:

Thank you for your question Katie. And first let me explain what 'well and truly stuck' means. If something is 'well and truly stuck' you really can not move it. So for example if your car breaks down and you try to push it and it won't move it may be well and truly stuck. So 'well and truly' here means absolutely stuck, you can't move it. And really when we say something is well and truly stuck it shows that we are actually a little bit frustrated or we really aren't very happy about the fact that we can't move it. So for example if I come home and I want to have a biscuit and I look in the biscuit tin and there are none there I can say 'well they are well and truly finished'.

However 'well and truly' is a very difficult phrase to use because it doesn't go with lots and lots of different adjectives. If you were to say the words 'well and truly' to someone in Britain they would imagine that the next word would be stuck. 'Well and truly' is an adverbial phrase to describe the adjective stuck. And they just go together.

There are no clear rules to for why certain adverbs go with certain adjectives, they just do. So, for example, if you say to someone in Britain the adverb – 'stunningly' – the adjective they're most likely to think of is 'beautiful'. These are what we call fixed phrases. They're phrases which just go together, they collocate – co locate – they go together. It's not just adverbs and adjectives which go together in this way. We often find nouns and nouns go together. So for example 'fish and chips'. Or adjectives and nouns, for example we can say - 'heavy smoker', someone who smokes a lot, or 'heavy drinker' someone who drinks a

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lot. But someone who eats a lot? No it's not a 'heavy eater' it's a 'big eater'. Basically these phrases which go together form patterns, there are no real rules to learn. You just have to be able to work out what the patterns are.

So how do you learn these phrases which go together? Well the two best things you can do are to read and to listen. When you're reading a newspaper or a book try to work out phrases that you see coming up more than once. If you see a phrase which goes together maybe two or three times then you can think 'mmm I think those go together, I think those collocate.'

And similarly if you're listening to the radio, when you're listening to the BBC World Service if you hear the phrase two or three times, make a note of it, because then you know 'mmm this is a collocation, this is a phrase which goes together.'

So hopefully Katie that answers your question. To sum up, 'well and truly is an adverbial phrase and most often you use it with the adjective 'stuck', 'well and truly stuck.' You can use it in one or two other circumstances, but usually you will hear it with the adjective 'stuck'. Although now I'm well and truly finished and I'm going to go and have a cup of tea.

The audio of Karen Adams' answer is available for download at:

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