DukeWrites Enrichment Suite
COCA: Doing a Basic Search and Narrowing Results
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Hi, I'm Rene Caputo, Duke University ESL specialist with the Thompson Writing Program. In this tutorial, we're going to take a closer look at COCA, the Corpus of Contemporary American English. You'll learn how to do a basic search, how to navigate around the site a bit, and how to narrow your search results to specific types of sources.

I've already logged in, which is indicated by this green for the profile icon, so let's get started. In COCA, you have a choice of either searching for a word or phrase. We're going to search for the phrase **in a matter of.** And click here on Find matching strings.

Imagine this scenario. You or someone that you're helping used this phrase in a piece of writing. And the response from an instructor, professor, or tutor was that what came after this phrase sounded a little bit awkward. So, we're going to examine how the phrase has been used by other writers and see what kind of words appear after this phrase.

So, here are our search results. We just did a search of COCA for in a matter of ~ without any guidelines about what kind of sources we wanted. And we have over 2500 results. A lot, right? So, let's go back to the search page here and click on Sections. We can see if we go down that here's Academic, so let's choose academic sources and do that search again.

And now we can see the results have been narrowed to fewer than 200. Let's look at some of those excerpts. Again, what we're looking for is what kind of words come after this phrase. And notice that the phrase is highlighted in all these excerpts.

The first example says: …in a matter of interpretation. , we have a noun there. And we have seconds, three months, hours, minutes, moments. Hours, hours, minutes, weeks, moments.

So, do you see any patterns there? And if so, what is a pattern that you see? So, what I'm noticing is the majority of these have a noun after this phrase that's in the plural form. And the noun is a unit or a measure of time: seconds, months, hours, minutes, days.

This example [cursor points to number 3] says: in a matter of three months, so you might have a number before that [noun]. And in the first example, it's different from those below, the ones that we looked at. In a matter of interpretation.

If we wanted to see more of that example, we can click anywhere here on the left below "click for more context." And you'll get a nice chunk of text there to give it more context.

In a matter of interpretation ~ So we can actually see here that that is the name of some publication.

Let's go back to Search again. If you look at the Sections of sources that are available, it looks as if it's a pretty short list. But you can scroll down. And there are even subdivisions in the section for Academic.

So, scrolling, scrolling, scrolling. And I'm going to choose Academic: Science and Technology. And do that search again ~ and let's see what the results look like here. So now, the searches have come back, their search has come back ~ with fewer than 50. And let's take a look at some of the excerpts from these academic sources in science and technology.

So, we have in a matter of seconds, years. In a matter of a few hours, so there's a new pattern. In a matter of minutes, hours, seconds, seconds, seconds, milliseconds, minutes, years, minutes, hours, minutes, seconds. Ok, so again we're seeing plural nouns of units of time. And here we have a few hours ~ so you can have a descriptor before that unit of time.

This is just an idea from looking for patterns and looking at examples ~ of some of the possible language that might follow this phrase. I'm just going to go to the search page again so you can see what that looked like.

We had a List search for in a matter of. And that is the default [a list search]. In a matter of. And we chose the section of Academic: science and technology. So, you might want to try some searches like this and narrow the sections and see what your results look like.

In this tutorial, we've explored how to do a basic search of a phrase, to navigate around the site, and how to narrow the sources that your results will come from. In our next video, we'll do some COCA searches that reveal what words seem to work well when they're used together. See you there!