DukeWrites Enrichment Suite

COCA: Doing a basic search and narrowing results
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Hi, I'm Rene Caputo, ESL specialist with Duke University's Thompson Writing Program. And in this tutorial, we are going to take a closer look at the Corpus of Contemporary American English, or COCA.

In this tutorial, you'll learn how to do a basic search, how to navigate around the site a bit, and also how to narrow your search results to specific genres.

So, you can notice up here ~ before we go into our search ~ that I have logged in. If I didn't do that, we would probably get interrupted by a reminder message. So let's go ahead and get started.

In COCA, you have a choice, you can either search for one word or you can search for a phrase. And we are going to search for the phrase **in a matter of.** So let's imagine this scenario. Either you or someone that you're helping has used this phrase in a piece of writing. And the instructor or professor has highlighted the word after this phrase in the writing and said that that word was awkward.

And so let's imagine we're trying to see patterns of words that appear after this phrase. So here we can see, if we don't narrow the categories at all, we have "in a matter of" with 1674 examples, which is quite a bit. If we want to see those, we can just click here. Depending on your wi-fi or internet connection, you can see that sometimes you have to wait for a little bit, but not too bad and it is free.

So, here we have **in a matter of** highlighted. On the left side of our screen, we can see the date that that was used, what genre or section it's in. So this is spoken, so most likely a news broadcast from CBS. And if we scroll down, we have fiction and magazines and news[papers] and academic. But let's imagine that we would like to narrow our search results.

So we're going to go back to our search here and click on Sections. So one step of the narrowing process would be to choose the Academic section ~ or journal articles ~ and do that search again.

Now we've narrowed the field to 169 results. Ok? But let's go back one more time, because you can narrow it even further. This list appears to be short, but actually it's quite long. And if you scroll down you can see the sub-sections or sub-genres that are included in the COCA corpus.

And here is the Academic section. So, I'm going to narrow this to Science and Technology. And now we have 41 examples here in our results. So let's look at some of these and see: Can we see a pattern in the words that appear after this phrase? Again, imagining that an instructor, a professor, or perhaps an editor said that that was awkward.

So, we have in a matter of: seconds, years or decades, a few hours, minutes, hours, seconds, seconds, milliseconds. So, if you were going to generalize: What kind of word is appearing after this phrase?

So first, we have time. And more specifically, we have time as a measure in a noun: seconds, years, hours, minutes. And even more specifically, a plural noun. So the pattern seems to be time in a plural noun form. Ok?

So here, we have the "in a matter of milliseconds". Again, if we want to learn more about the source, we can go to the left here: It's 2006 in Mechanical Engineering. And if we want to look at that source, we can click on one of these here. And on the top, we have very detailed information about where that phrase occurred. And here we have a paragraph worth of context for that.

So this is one of the really valuable ways in which you can use COCA, is to look for patterns that previous writers have used. And let's just go back to this page again. So we were searching in academic: science and technology ~ one of the sub-genres. And I encourage you to look through those sections and sub-sections and see what might be most useful to you.

So in this tutorial, we've explored how to do a basic search of a phrase, to navigate around the site a little bit, and how to choose the genres your results will come from. In our next video, we'll do some COCA searches that reveal what words seem to work well together. See you there.