Regular Expressions

Chapter 11

Python for Informatics: Exploring Information
www.pythonlearn.com

Regular Expressions

In computing, a regular expression, also referred to as "regex" or "regexp", provides a concise and flexible means for matching strings of text, such as particular characters, words, or patterns of characters. A regular expression is written in a formal language that can be interpreted by a regular expression processor.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regular_expression

Regular Expressions

Really clever "wild card" expressions for matching and parsing strings.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regular_expression

Really smart "Find" or "Search"

Understanding Regular Expressions

- Very powerful and quite cryptic
- Fun once you understand them
- Regular expressions are a language unto themselves
- A language of "marker characters" - programming with characters
- It is kind of an "old school" language - compact

http://xkcd.com/208/

Regular Expression Quick Guide

```
^        Matches the beginning of a line
$        Matches the end of the line
.        Matches any character
\s       Matches whitespace
\S       Matches any non-whitespace character
*        Repeats a character zero or more times
*?       Repeats a character zero or more times (non-greedy)
+        Repeats a chracter one or more times
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[aeiou]  Matches a single character in the listed set
[^XYZ]   Matches a single character not in the listed set
[a-z0-9] The set of characters can include a range
(        Indicates where string extraction is to start
)        Indicates where string extraction is to end
```

The Regular Expression Module

- Before you can use regular expressions in your program, you must import the library using "import re"
- You can use re.search() to see if a string matches a regular expression similar to using the find() method for strings
- You can use re.findall() extract portions of a string that match your regular expression similar to a combination of find() and slicing: var[5:10]

Using re.search() like find()

```
hand = open('mbox-short.txt')
for line in hand:
    line = line.rstrip()
    if line.find('From:') >= 0:
        print line
```

```
import re
hand = open('mbox-short.txt')
for line in hand:
    line = line.rstrip()
    if re.search('From:', line) :
        print line
```

Using re.search() like startswith()

```
hand = open('mbox-short.txt')
for line in hand:
    line = line.rstrip()
    if line.startswith('From:') :
        print line
```

```
import re
hand = open('mbox-short.txt')
for line in hand:
    line = line.rstrip()
    if re.search('^From:', line) :
        print line
```

We fine-tune what is matched by adding special characters to the string

Wild-Card Characters

- The dot character matches any character
- If you add the asterisk character, the character is "any number of times"

```
X-Sieve: CMU Sieve 2.3
X-DSPAM-Result: Innocent
X-DSPAM-Confidence: 0.8475
X-Content-Type-Message-Body: text/plain
```

^X.*:

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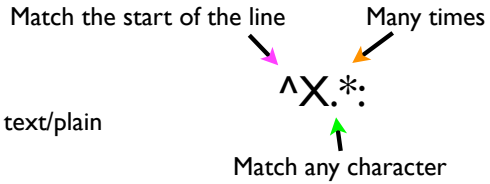

Wild-Card Characters

- The dot character matches any character
- If you add the asterisk character, the character is "any number of times"

X-Sieve: CMU Sieve 2.3
X-DSPAM-Result: Innocent
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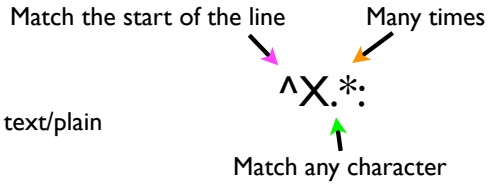
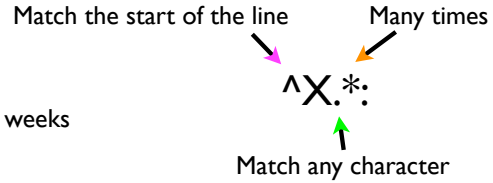


Fine-Tuning Your Match

- Depending on how "clean" your data is and the purpose of your application, you may want to narrow your match down a bit

X-Sieve: CMU Sieve 2.3
X-DSPAM-Result: Innocent

X Plane is behind schedule: two weeks



Fine-Tuning Your Match

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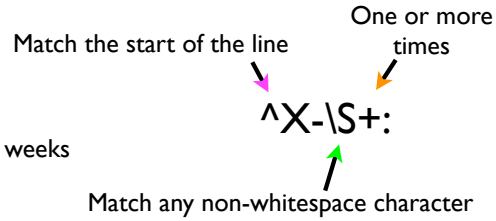

Matching and Extracting Data

- The re.search() returns a True/False depending on whether the string matches the regular expression
- If we actually want the matching strings to be extracted, we use re.findall()

[0-9]+

One or more digits

```
>>> import re
>>> x = 'My 2 favorite numbers are 19 and 42'
>>> y = re.findall('[0-9]+',x)
>>> print y
['2', '19', '42']
```

Matching and Extracting Data

- When we use re.findall() it returns a list of zero or more sub-strings that match the regular expression

```
>>> import re
>>> x = 'My 2 favorite numbers are 19 and 42'
>>> y = re.findall('[0-9]+',x)
>>> print y
['2', '19', '42']
>>> y = re.findall('[AEIOU]+',x)
>>> print y
[]
```

Warning: Greedy Matching

- The repeat characters (* and +) push outward in both directions (greedy) to match the largest possible string

```
>>> import re
>>> x = 'From: Using the : character'
>>> y = re.findall('^F.+:', x)
>>> print y
['From: Using the :']
```

Why not 'From:'?

One or more characters

^F.+:

First character in the match is an F

Last character in the match is a :

Non-Greedy Matching

- Not all regular expression repeat codes are greedy! If you add a ? character - the + and * chill out a bit...

```
>>> import re
>>> x = 'From: Using the : character'
>>> y = re.findall('^F.+?:', x)
>>> print y
['From:']
```

One or more characters but not greedily

^F.+?:

First character in the match is an F

Last character in the match is a :

Fine Tuning String Extraction

- You can refine the match for re.findall() and separately determine which portion of the match that is to be extracted using parenthesis

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008
```

```
>>> y = re.findall('\S+@\S+',x)
>>> print y
['stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za']
>>> y = re.findall('^From:.*? (\S+@\S+)',x)
>>> print y
['stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za']
```

\S+@\S+

At least one non-whitespace character

Fine Tuning String Extraction

- Parenthesis are not part of the match - but they tell where to start and stop what string to extract

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008
```

```
>>> y = re.findall('\S+@\S+',x)
>>> print y
['stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za']
>>> y = re.findall('^From (\S+@\S+)',x)
>>> print y
['stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za']
```

^From (\S+@\S+)

```
                          21          31
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008
```

```
>>> data = 'From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008'
>>> atpos = data.find('@')
>>> print atpos
21
>>> sppos = data.find(' ',atpos)
>>> print sppos
31
>>> host = data[atpos+1 : sppos]
>>> print host
uct.ac.za
```

Extracting a host name - using find and string slicing.

The Double Split Version

- Sometimes we split a line one way and then grab one of the pieces of the line and split that piece again

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008
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The Double Split Version

- Sometimes we split a line one way and then grab one of the pieces of the line and split that piece again

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008
```

```
words = line.split()
email = words[1]
pieces = email.split('@')
print pieces[1]
```

```
stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za
['stephen.marquard', 'uct.ac.za']
'uct.ac.za'
```

The Regex Version

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008
```

```
import re
lin = 'From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008'
y = re.findall('@([^ ]*)',lin)
print y
['uct.ac.za']
```

```
'@([^ ]*)'
```

Look through the string until you find an at-sign

The Regex Version

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008
```

```
import re
lin = 'From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008'
y = re.findall('@([^ ]*)',lin)
print y
['uct.ac.za']
```

```
'@([^ ]*)'
```

Match non-blank character Match many of them

The Regex Version

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008
```

```
import re
lin = 'From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008'
y = re.findall('@([^ ]*)',lin)
print y
['uct.ac.za']
```

```
'@([^ ]*)'
```

Extract the non-blank characters

Even Cooler Regex Version

From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan 5 09:14:16 2008

```
import re
lin = 'From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008'
y = re.findall('^From .*@([^ ]*)',lin)
print y
['uct.ac.za']
```

```
'^From .*@([^ ]*)'
```

Starting at the beginning of the line, look for the string 'From '

Even Cooler Regex Version

From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan 5 09:14:16 2008

```
import re
lin = 'From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008'
y = re.findall('^From .*@([^ ]*)',lin)
print y
['uct.ac.za']
```

```
'^From .*@([^ ]*)'
```

Skip a bunch of characters, looking for an at-sign

Even Cooler Regex Version

From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan 5 09:14:16 2008

```
import re
lin = 'From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008'
y = re.findall('^From .*@([^ ]*)',lin)
print y
['uct.ac.za']
```

```
'^From .*@([^ ]*)'
```

Start 'extracting'

Even Cooler Regex Version

From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan 5 09:14:16 2008

```
import re
lin = 'From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008'
y = re.findall('^From .*@([^ ]*)',lin)
print y
['uct.ac.za']
```

```
'^From .*@([^ ]*)'
```

Match non-blank character Match many of them

Even Cooler Regex Version

```
From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008
```

```
import re
lin = 'From stephen.marquard@uct.ac.za Sat Jan  5 09:14:16 2008'
y = re.findall('^From .*@([^ ]*)',lin)
print y
['uct.ac.za']
```

`'^From .*@([^ ]*)'`

Stop 'extracting'

Spam Confidence

```
import re
hand = open('mbox-short.txt')
numlist = list()
for line in hand:
    line = line.rstrip()
    stuff = re.findall('^X-DSPAM-Confidence: ([0-9.]+)', line)
    if len(stuff) != 1 : continue
    num = float(stuff[0])
    numlist.append(num)

print 'Maximum:', max(numlist)
```

```
python ds.py
Maximum: 0.9907
```

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```

Escape Character

- If you want a special regular expression character to just behave normally (most of the time) you prefix it with '\'

```
>>> import re
>>> x = 'We just received $10.00 for cookies.'
>>> y = re.findall('\$[0-9.]+',x)
>>> print y
['$10.00']
```

At least one or more

`\$[0-9.]+`

A real dollar sign

A digit or period

Summary

- Regular expressions are a cryptic but powerful language for matching strings and extracting elements from those strings
- Regular expressions have special characters that indicate intent