

Regular Expressions

Chapter 11



Python for Everybody
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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

Regular expression - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

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Regular expression

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

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, a program that either serves as a [parser generator](#) or examines text and identifies parts that match the provided [specification](#).

The following examples illustrate a few specifications that could be expressed in a regular expression:

- The sequence of characters "car" appearing consecutively in any context, such as in "car", "cartoon", or "bicarbonate"
- The sequence of characters "car" occurring in that order with other characters between them, such as in "Icelander" or "chandler"

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

WHENEVER I LEARN A NEW SKILL I CONCOCT ELABORATE FANTASY SCENARIOS WHERE IT LETS ME SAVE THE DAY.

OH NO! THE KILLER MUST HAVE FOLLOWED HER ON VACATION!



BUT TO FIND THEM WE'D HAVE TO SEARCH THROUGH 200 MB OF EMAILS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING FORMATTED LIKE AN ADDRESS!



IT'S HOPELESS!

EVERYBODY STAND BACK.



I KNOW REGULAR EXPRESSIONS.



<http://xkcd.com/208/>

Regular Expression Quick Guide

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

Match the start of the
line

Many
times

^ **X** **.** ***** **:**

Match any character

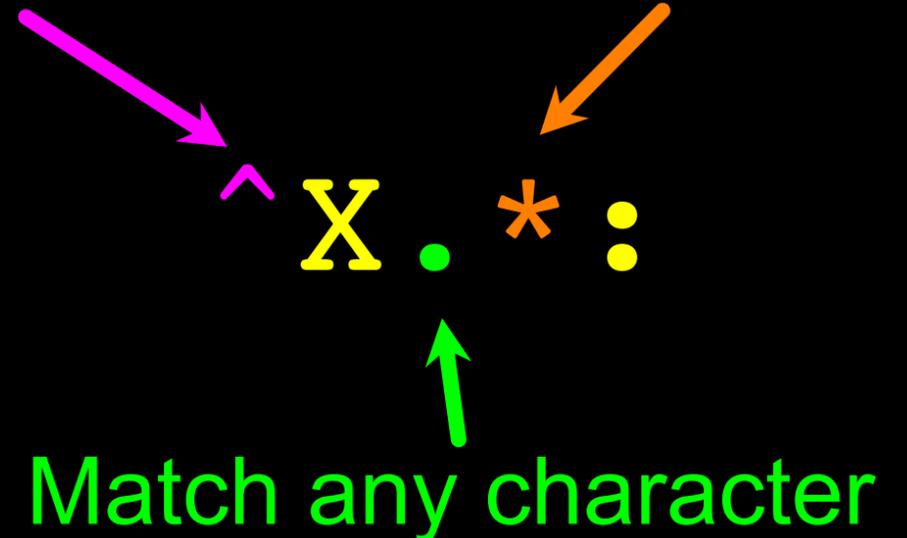
Fine-Tuning Your Match

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
```

Match the start of
the line

Many
times



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
```

Match the start of
the line

One or more
times

X - **S** + :

Match any non-whitespace character

Matching and Extracting Data

- `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

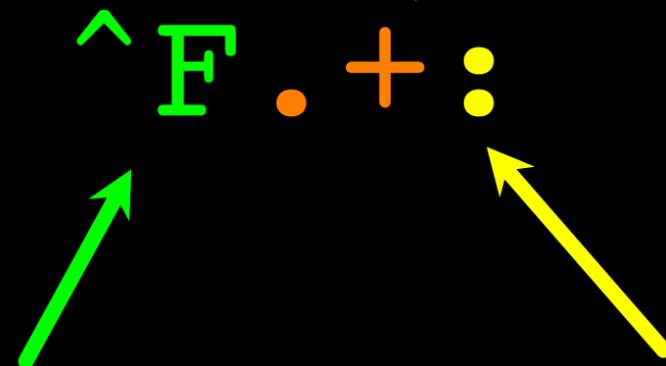
```
>>> import re
>>> x = 'From: Using the : character'
>>> y = re.findall('^F.+:', x)
>>> print(y)
['From: Using the :']
```

Why not 'From:' ?

First character in the match is an F

Last character in the match is a :

One or more characters



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:']
```

^ F . + ? :

One or more
characters but
not greedy

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 is to be extracted by using parentheses

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']
```

`\S+@\S+`
↑ ↑
At least one
non-whitespace
character

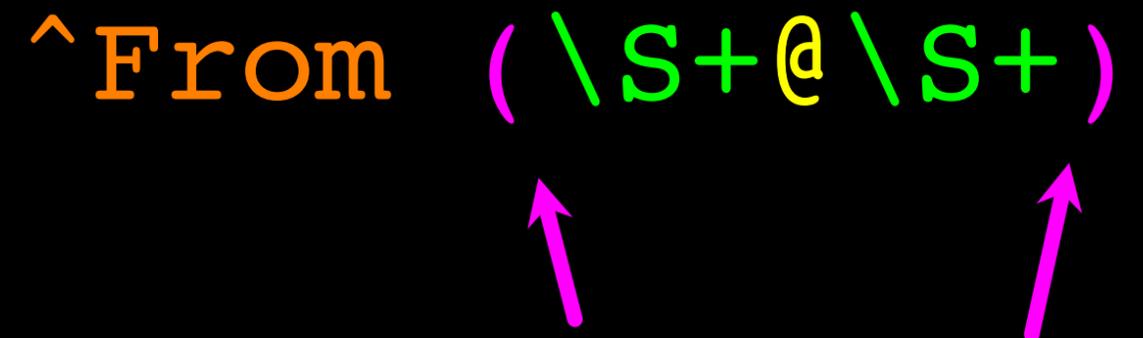
Fine-Tuning String Extraction

Parentheses 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+)`

A diagram illustrating the fine-tuning of a string extraction. It shows the text `^From (\S+@\S+)` where the `From` part is in orange and the `(\S+@\S+)` part is in green. Two pink arrows point upwards from below to the opening parenthesis `(` and the closing parenthesis `)` of the green part, indicating that the match is bounded by these parentheses.

String Parsing Examples...

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

21 ↓ 31 ↓

uct.ac.za

```
>>> 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 Pattern

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

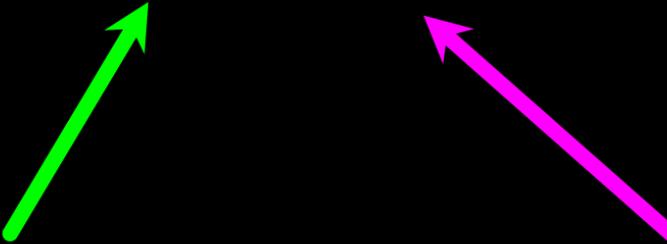
Even Cooler Regex Version

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

A diagram illustrating the regex pattern. The pattern is shown as a string: '^From .*@([^]*)'. A green arrow points from the text 'Starting at the beginning of the line' to the caret character '^' at the start of the pattern. A purple arrow points from the text 'look for the string 'From'' to the word 'From' in the pattern.

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

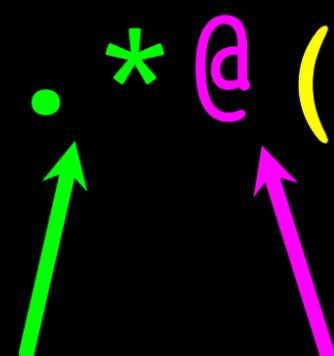
Even Cooler Regex Version

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

A diagram showing the regex pattern '^From . * @ ([^] *)' with two arrows. A green arrow points from the text 'Skip a bunch of characters' below to the dot character in the pattern. A purple arrow points from the text 'looking for an at sign' below to the at sign character in the pattern.

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



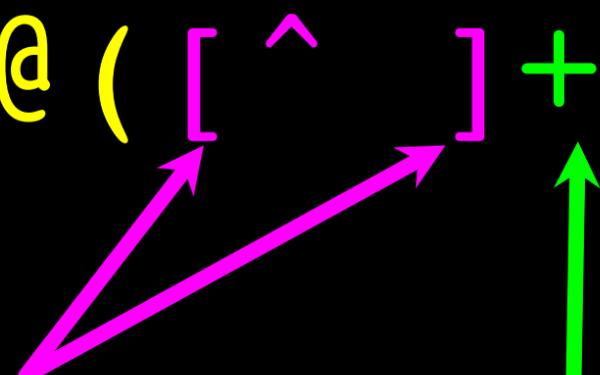
Even Cooler Regex Version

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))
```

X-DSPAM-Confidence: 0.8475

python ds.py

Maximum: 0.9907

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



Acknowledgements / Contributions



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