Learning to Use VLOOKUP with Partial Text Matching in Excel

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October 28, 2025

Most intermediate users of Excel quickly become proficient with the standard application of the VLOOKUP function, which is traditionally employed to locate data based on an exact match criterion. However, the complexity of real-world data frequently necessitates a more flexible approach to lookups. Data analysis often requires the ability to identify and retrieve a corresponding value when the lookup cell merely **contains** a specified word or fragment of text, rather than matching the entry precisely.

This challenge is elegantly solved by incorporating wildcard characters into the lookup process. This specialized technique dramatically extends the versatility of the traditional VLOOKUP function, enabling precise data retrieval even when dealing with inconsistent or lengthy text strings. This comprehensive guide details the mechanism, steps, and best practices for implementing a partial text VLOOKUP, ensuring your data extraction capabilities are both robust and flexible.

Mastering VLOOKUP for Partial Text Matching

The core concept behind successful partial text matching in Excel relies on the strategic use of wildcard characters. Specifically, the asterisk (*****) acts as a universal placeholder, capable of representing any sequence of characters--or even no characters--at the position where it is placed. By combining this wildcard with your desired search term, you transform an exact match requirement into a containment search.

When you place an asterisk both before and after your lookup criterion, you are instructing Excel to find that specific text string anywhere within the target cell, whether it is at the beginning, the end, or in the middle. This maneuver is essential for overcoming data entry variations where auxiliary text might surround the critical identifier you are attempting to locate. Without this flexibility, the traditional VLOOKUP would fail entirely, returning an error value.

The ability to perform partial matches is particularly valuable when working with descriptions, product names, or addresses contained within a large dataset where the required search term might be embedded within a longer string. This technique ensures that your lookup functions remain highly efficient and adaptable, significantly reducing the manual effort required for data cleaning and preparation before analysis can begin.

The Anatomy of the Wildcard VLOOKUP Formula

To execute a partial match lookup using VLOOKUP, the standard formula structure must be modified to dynamically incorporate the necessary wildcard characters into the **lookup_value** argument. The resulting string must tell Excel that the search text can be preceded and followed by any other text.

The standard formula structure that facilitates this powerful operation is constructed as follows:

=VLOOKUP("*"&A11&"*",A2:B8,2,FALSE)

In this formula, the concatenation of asterisks around the lookup cell reference (**A11**) creates the flexible search string, such as `"*SearchTerm*"`. This instructs VLOOKUP to scan the first column of the specified data range (**A2:B8**) for any entry containing the content of **A11**. The value **2** indicates that the result should be pulled from the second column of the range. Critically, the final argument, **FALSE**, must be used to ensure an exact match is sought against the pattern generated by the wildcards, preventing incorrect approximate matches.

Dynamic Search Strings: Utilizing Concatenation

The essential mechanism for creating a flexible lookup value lies in the utilization of the concatenation operator (**&**). This operator allows us to join separate text elements--in this case, the literal asterisk characters and the dynamic content of a cell--into a single, cohesive search string that the VLOOKUP function can process.

Consider the formula segment: **"*"&A11&"*"**. This sophisticated expression is composed of three distinct parts that are seamlessly joined: first, a literal opening asterisk (enclosed in quotes); second, the textual data stored in cell **A11**; and third, a literal closing asterisk. If cell **A11** contains the word "Engine", this segment dynamically evaluates to the pattern **"*Engine*"**. This constructed string then functions as the core **lookup_value** that drives the partial search.

Mastering this concatenation operator is vital because it ensures the search term remains dynamic. Instead of hardcoding the word "Engine" directly into the formula (which would require manual updates), linking it to a cell reference allows the user to change the lookup word simply by editing **A11**. This dynamic structure provides superior flexibility and greatly enhances the utility of your Excel workbook for ongoing analysis.

Step-by-Step Practical Implementation

To solidify the theoretical knowledge, let us walk through a concrete example. Imagine a large dataset tracking sales records, where the store names are often verbose or slightly inconsistent. Our goal is to extract the total sales associated with stores that include the specific name "Axel," regardless of surrounding text, such as "Axel's Supermart" or "West Coast Axel Branch."

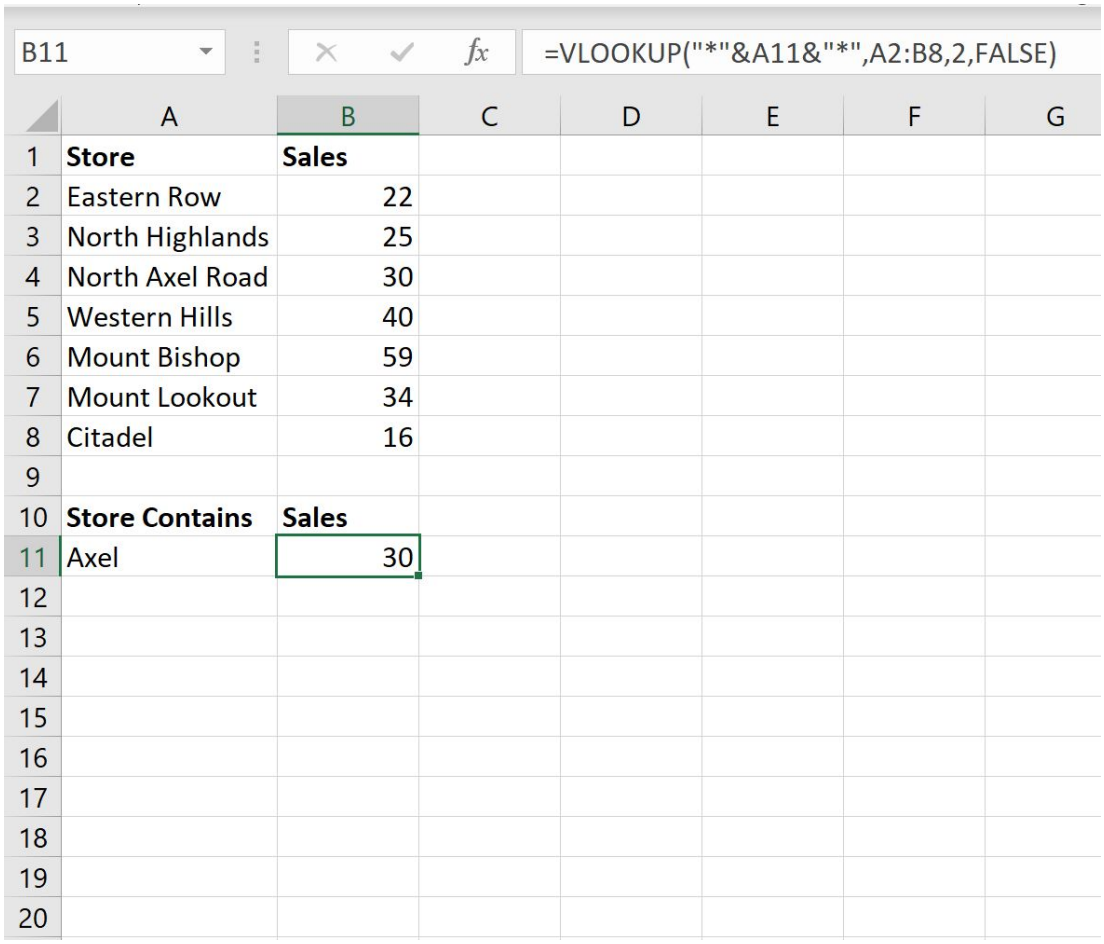
The relevant sales data is structured as shown below, with store names in the first column and sales figures in the second:

	A	B	C	D	E
1	**Store**	**Sales**			
2	Eastern Row	22			
3	North Highlands	25			
4	North Axel Road	30			
5	Western Hills	40			
6	Mount Bishop	59			
7	Mount Lookout	34			
8	Citadel	16			
9					
10					
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					
16					
17					
18					
19					
20					

Assuming we input the search fragment "Axel" into cell **A11**, the complete formula required to locate the partial match and retrieve the corresponding sales value is:

=VLOOKUP("*"&A11&"*",A2:B8,2,FALSE)

Once entered, Excel executes this instruction by constructing the search pattern `"*Axel*"` and searching the range **A2:B8**. The formula successfully locates the row corresponding to "Axel's Supermart" and then efficiently returns the value from the second column. The successful outcome of this operation, demonstrating the accurate retrieval of the sales figure, is visually confirmed in the subsequent screenshot.



	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	**Store**	**Sales**					
2	Eastern Row	22					
3	North Highlands	25					
4	North Axel Road	30					
5	Western Hills	40					
6	Mount Bishop	59					
7	Mount Lookout	34					
8	Citadel	16					
9							
10	**Store Contains**	**Sales**					
11	Axel	30					
12							
13							
14							
15							
16							
17							
18							
19							
20							

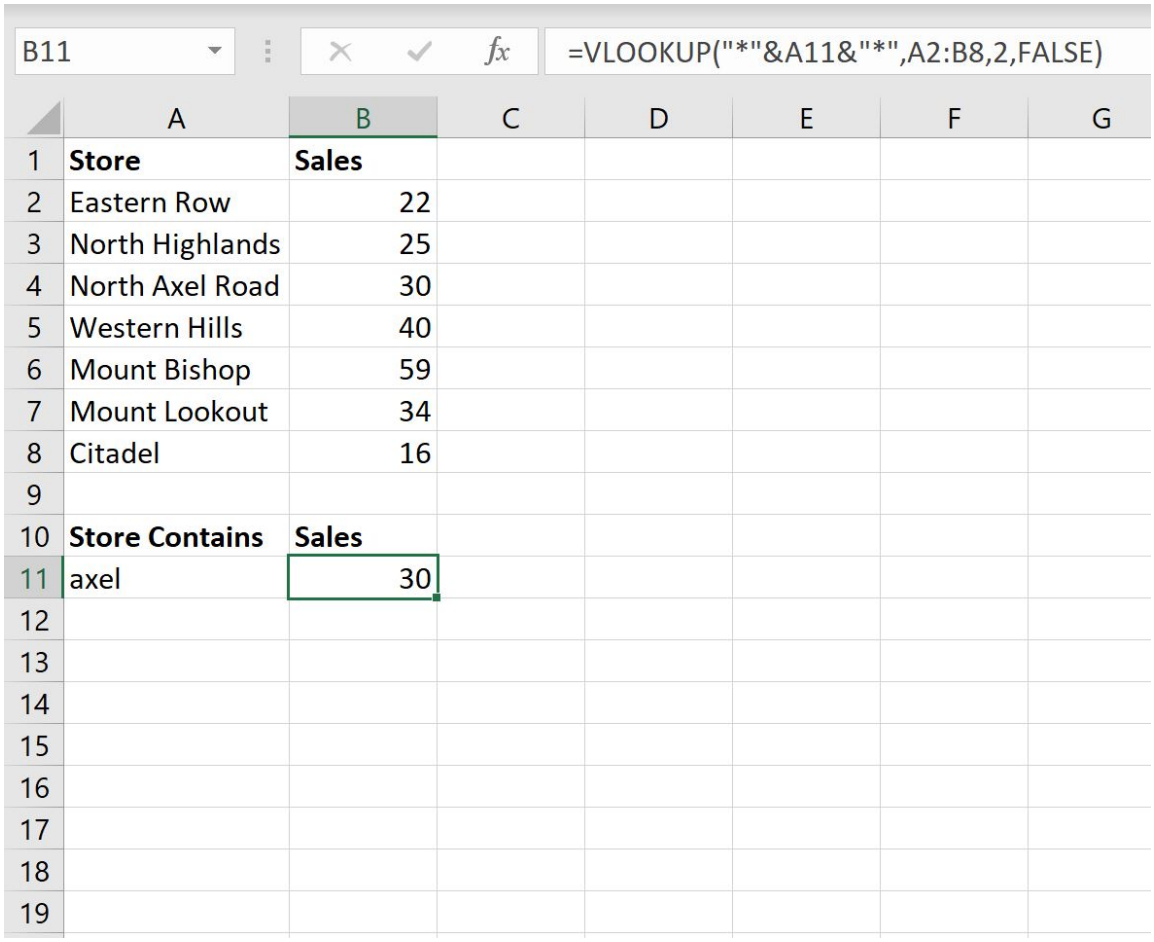
This practical demonstration clearly validates that the VLOOKUP formula, when enhanced with wildcard characters, accurately identifies "Axel's Supermart" within the list and returns the sales figure of **30**. This methodology provides a robust solution for dealing with common challenges associated with real-world data variation.

Handling Data Inconsistency: Case-Insensitivity

A significant, often overlooked benefit of utilizing this partial VLOOKUP method in Excel is its inherent case-insensitivity. For the vast majority of operations, standard Excel functions, including VLOOKUP, do not distinguish between uppercase and lowercase letters during text comparisons. This characteristic is exceptionally useful when performing lookups.

This feature means that data entry errors related to capitalization--a frequent issue in large spreadsheets--will not hinder the successful execution of your lookup. Whether the search term entered into cell **A11** is "Axel" or "axel" (all lowercase), the formula will treat them identically when searching for a match within the target dataset. This tolerance for casing inconsistency saves considerable time that might otherwise be spent standardizing text fields.

As illustrated in the screenshot below, even if the user enters the lookup value "axel" (lowercase) into the designated cell, the formula successfully constructs the pattern `"*axel*"` and still identifies "Axel's Supermart."



	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	**Store**	**Sales**					
2	Eastern Row	22					
3	North Highlands	25					
4	North Axel Road	30					
5	Western Hills	40					
6	Mount Bishop	59					
7	Mount Lookout	34					
8	Citadel	16					
9							
10	**Store Contains**	**Sales**					
11	axel	30					
12							
13							
14							
15							
16							
17							
18							
19							

The image confirms that the formula consistently returns the correct sales value of **30**, regardless of the case used for the search term. This robust behavior underscores the reliability of utilizing VLOOKUP with wildcard characters for flexible, forgiving, and powerful text lookups in Excel.

Transitioning to Modern Lookup Functions

While the combination of VLOOKUP and wildcard characters remains a highly effective legacy method for partial matching, users leveraging newer versions of Excel, particularly those with Microsoft 365 subscriptions or Excel 2019 and later, benefit from more advanced alternatives. The XLOOKUP function is the intended successor, offering substantial improvements over traditional lookup tools like VLOOKUP and the powerful but complex INDEX/MATCH pairing.

XLOOKUP natively supports wildcard characters for partial matches, often requiring a simpler syntax than VLOOKUP. Furthermore, it overcomes VLOOKUP's limitations by allowing lookups to

the left of the lookup column and by offering greater flexibility in returning results. Nevertheless, the fundamental principle--constructing a search string using the concatenation operator (**&**) to enclose the search term with asterisks--remains a consistent and necessary skill across all modern lookup functions when partial matching is required.

Regardless of which function you choose for your data retrieval tasks, mastering the dynamic application of wildcard characters is an essential step toward becoming an advanced user of Excel. This skill ensures that you can handle complex textual data efficiently and extract precise information even from messy or unstructured sources, significantly improving the quality and speed of your data analysis.

Additional Resources for Advanced Excel Techniques

To continue developing your expertise in data manipulation and lookup functions within Excel, we recommend exploring the following related tutorials and concepts:

Deep dive into VLOOKUP's range_lookup argument: Understanding the difference between exact and approximate match types.

Leveraging INDEX/MATCH: A powerful combination offering more flexibility than VLOOKUP, especially when dealing with non-standard table structures.

Exploring the capabilities of XLOOKUP: A detailed introduction to the modern lookup function and its benefits for handling complex scenarios.

Techniques for Data Validation and Cleansing: Essential methods for maintaining data integrity and consistency across large datasets.