Use COUNTIF Contains in Google Sheets

Authored by

Mohammed looti

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In the dynamic environment of modern data analysis, especially when working within sophisticated spreadsheet platforms like **Google Sheets**, the ability to extract highly specific quantitative insights from large datasets is critically important. A frequent and essential requirement is counting the number of **cells** that contain a particular text fragment or **string**, rather than relying solely on exact matches. This capability--often referred to as "contains" matching--is invaluable for tasks such as sentiment analysis, keyword tracking across inventory descriptions, or efficiently categorizing unstructured survey responses.

This comprehensive tutorial is designed to provide expert guidance on how to leverage the powerful built-in functions, specifically **COUNTIF** and **COUNTIFS**, within **Google Sheets** to execute these precise "contains" matches. We will meticulously detail the methodologies for both single-criterion counting and complex multi-criteria evaluations, offering clear explanations, technical syntax, and practical, real-world examples to ensure you master these fundamental spreadsheet operations.

Understanding Wildcard Characters in Google Sheets

The core mechanism that enables "contains" searches and flexible pattern matching in **Google Sheets** is the strategic use of **wildcard characters**. These specialized symbols are placeholders that represent unknown or variable sequences of characters within your search criteria, thereby making your counting **formulas** exceptionally versatile and adaptable. For the specific application of identifying **cells** that partially match a given text, the asterisk symbol (*****) serves as our primary **wildcard character** of choice.

The asterisk (*****) possesses the crucial property of matching any sequence of characters of any length, including zero characters. When this symbol is placed immediately before and after the target **string**, it effectively instructs the system to search for that **string** regardless of what text precedes or follows it within the **cell's** content. For instance, the pattern `"*report*"` would successfully match entries such as "Final Report Q3", "Daily Report", or simply "report". Grasping this concept of flanking the search term with asterisks is the foundational step toward unlocking the full power of **COUNTIF** and **COUNTIFS** for partial matches.

This powerful feature eliminates the constraints of requiring exact matches, shifting the focus to identifying partial **string** occurrences. This dramatically enhances your ability to manipulate and analyze textual data within **Google Sheets**. Without the use of **wildcard characters**, achieving accurate counting based on partial text would necessitate significantly more complex, lengthy, and less efficient array **formulas**, making the asterisk a vital component of efficient data processing.

COUNTIF for Single Criteria "Contains" Matches

The **COUNTIF** function is a cornerstone of spreadsheet analysis, specifically engineered to count

the number of **cells** within a designated **range** that fulfill one singular condition. When the objective is to count **cells** that contain a specific text **string**--as opposed to an exact cell-by-cell match--**COUNTIF**, when coupled with the asterisk **wildcard character**, transforms into an indispensable analytical tool. This approach is perfectly suited for straightforward scenarios where you are isolating one specific text fragment within a single column of data.

The canonical syntax required for implementing **COUNTIF** to execute partial text searches is defined as follows:

=COUNTIF(range, "*string*")

In this structure, the `range` argument identifies the collection of **cells** that are to be evaluated (for instance, **A2:A11**). Crucially, the argument `"*string*"` represents the search pattern incorporating the **wildcard character**. This pattern signals to **Google Sheets** that it must count every **cell** within the specified **range** that includes the designated **string** somewhere within its content. The asterisks enveloping the search term are essential, as they guarantee that the target **string** can be preceded or succeeded by any number of characters.

To provide a clear application, consider a scenario involving a dataset in **Google Sheets** containing a list of sports teams. Our goal is to determine how many entries in the "Team" column contain the **string** "Mav" (which would match names like "Mavericks" or "Mavs"). We will apply our counting **formula** to the sample **range** **A2:A11**. The specific **formula** needed to execute this partial matching task is:

=COUNTIF(A2:A11,"*Mav*")

This **formula** executes a scan of every **cell** within the defined range. Any **cell** that includes the substring "Mav" will be aggregated into the final count. The surrounding asterisks are mandatory, serving as **wildcard characters** that permit the existence of any surrounding characters, thus ensuring a true "contains" match.

The screenshot below visually confirms the accurate application and resulting output of this method:

E1 =COUNTIF(A2:A11,"*Mav*")

	A	B	C	D	E
1	**Team**	**Position**	**Points**		5
2	Mavs	Guard	21		
3	Mavs	Guard	14		
4	Mavs	Forward	19		
5	Mavs	Forward	30		
6	Mavs	Forward	28		
7	Spurs	Guard	20		
8	Spurs	Guard	12		
9	Spurs	Guard	8		
10	Spurs	Forward	17		
11	Spurs	Forward	30		
12					
13					
14					
15					
16					
17					
18					
19					
20					

The clear result of 5 confirms that five rows in the "Team" column successfully contain the target **string** "Mav" within their **cell** content, validating the reliability and precision of the "contains" logic when implemented with **COUNTIF**.

COUNTIFS for Multiple Criteria "Contains" Matches

While the **COUNTIF** function is superb for evaluating singular conditions, advanced and real-world data analysis often mandates the simultaneous evaluation of multiple criteria. This complex requirement is precisely where the specialized **COUNTIFS** function demonstrates its superior capability. **COUNTIFS** is designed to count **cells** that successfully satisfy two or more conditions across various specified **ranges**. By integrating this function with **wildcard characters**, we can execute highly sophisticated, multi-conditional "contains" searches using logical AND operations.

The standard syntax for **COUNTIFS** requires a structured sequence of paired arguments: a criterion **range** followed immediately by its corresponding criteria. This allows for the construction of intricate condition sets:

=COUNTIFS(range1, "*string1*", range2, "*string2*")

Within this powerful construction, `range1` and `range2` designate the respective columns or **cell ranges** being tested. The arguments `"*string1*"` and `"*string2*"` define the specific "contains" conditions, with each one necessarily utilizing the asterisk **wildcard character** for partial matching. Critically, this pattern is scalable and can be readily extended to encompass numerous `range`/`criteria` pairs, facilitating highly granular filtering and counting operations across large datasets in **Google Sheets**.

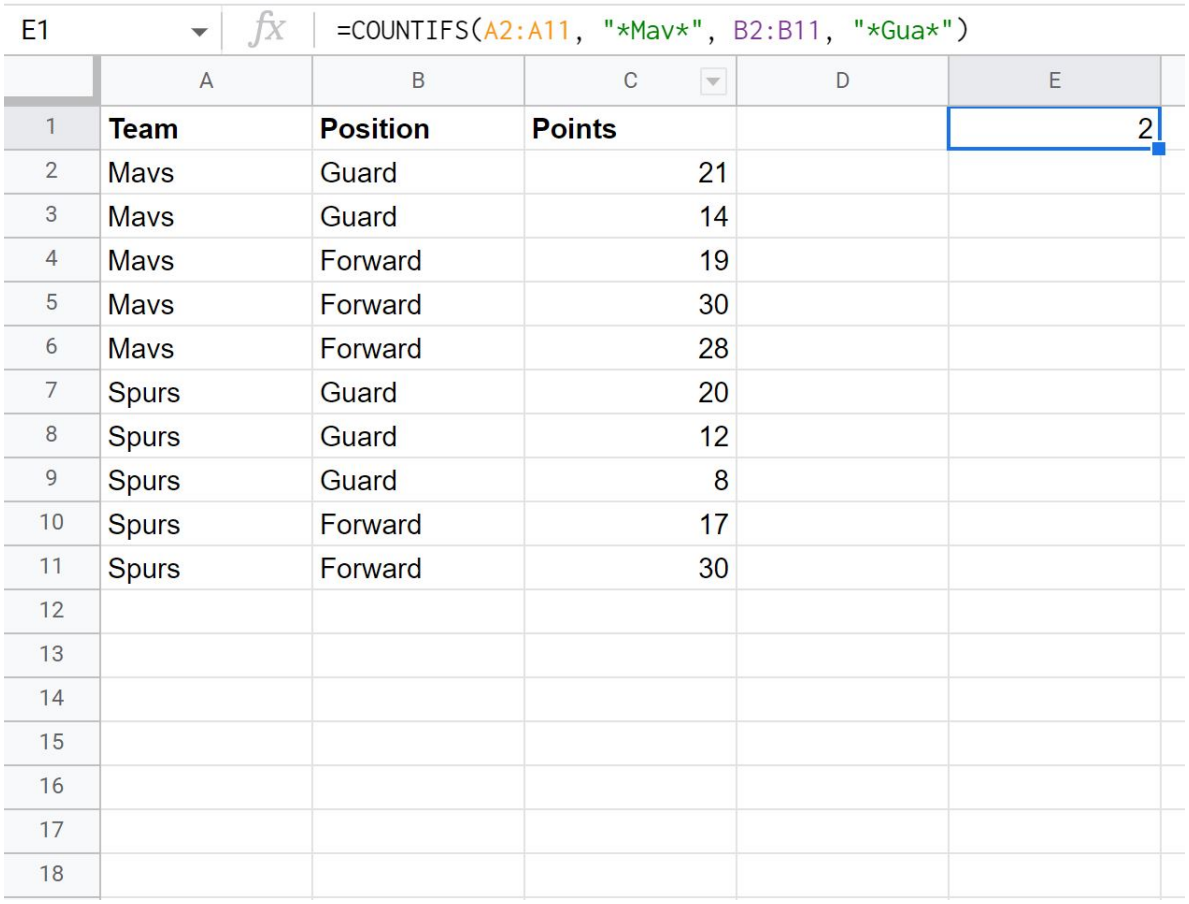
To demonstrate this capability, let us expand upon our prior example. Suppose the new requirement is to count players whose team name contains "Mav" AND whose position contains "Guard". This operation necessitates checking two distinct conditions across two separate data columns. The **COUNTIFS** **formula** is ideally suited to handle this type of dual-criteria query.

For this precise, complex scenario, the resulting **formula** must be structured as follows:

=COUNTIFS(A2:A11, "*Mav*", B2:B11, "*Guar*")

This powerful **formula** specifically counts only those rows where both conditions are simultaneously met: the **cell** in the **A2:A11** **range** (Team column) contains the **string** "Mav" AND the corresponding **cell** in the **B2:B11** **range** (Position column) contains "Guar". This mandatory "AND" logical relationship is the defining characteristic of the **COUNTIFS** function, enabling highly precise and intersecting data filters.

Review the accompanying screenshot for a clear, visual confirmation of this formula's execution and the resulting output:



	A	B	C	D	E
1	**Team**	**Position**	**Points**		2
2	Mavs	Guard	21		
3	Mavs	Guard	14		
4	Mavs	Forward	19		
5	Mavs	Forward	30		
6	Mavs	Forward	28		
7	Spurs	Guard	20		
8	Spurs	Guard	12		
9	Spurs	Guard	8		
10	Spurs	Forward	17		
11	Spurs	Forward	30		
12					
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16					
17					
18					

The visual evidence confirms that the **formula** successfully returns a count of 2. This result indicates that exactly two rows within our sample dataset satisfy both criteria concurrently: possessing "Mav" in the Team column and "Guar" in the Position column. This outcome effectively demonstrates the robust, multi-dimensional analytical capability inherent in the **COUNTIFS** function.

Common Pitfalls and Best Practices

While utilizing **COUNTIF** and **COUNTIFS** for "contains" logic in **Google Sheets** is highly efficient, understanding potential pitfalls and implementing rigorous best practices is paramount for ensuring accuracy. A critical factor to remember is the default handling of **case sensitivity**. By design, both **COUNTIF** and **COUNTIFS** are not case-sensitive; consequently, a search for "mav" will match "Mav", "MAV", or "Mavericks" equally. If your analysis demands strict case-sensitive matching, you must integrate these functions with advanced tools like `FIND` or `EXACT` within an `ARRAYFORMULA`, a method that provides superior control but significantly increases formula complexity.

Another important consideration involves the management of **empty cells**. It is essential to note that the **wildcard character** `*` is explicitly designed not to match blank or empty **cells**. If your

dataset includes blanks that must be accounted for or excluded specifically, you will need to incorporate supplementary criteria or employ separate counting **formulas** such as `COUNTBLANK` or `ISBLANK`. Furthermore, when dealing with extraordinarily large datasets, the extensive use of **wildcard character** **formulas** may occasionally lead to performance degradation. While these functions generally perform admirably for typical datasets, optimization might be required if computation speed becomes a critical constraint.

To ensure reliable results, consistently double-check the accuracy and alignment of your specified **ranges** and criteria syntax. A frequently encountered error is the omission of the essential quotation marks and asterisks around the "contains" **string** (e.g., forgetting to use `"*string*"`). Additionally, when employing the **COUNTIFS** function for multiple conditions, always verify that the **ranges** designated for each criterion possess identical size and vertical alignment. Adherence to these guidelines is fundamental for producing accurate, reliable, and error-free results in all your complex counting analyses.

Conclusion

Achieving mastery over the "contains" matching functionality using **COUNTIF** and **COUNTIFS** in **Google Sheets** represents a significant expansion of your data analysis capabilities. By skillfully harnessing the flexibility of **wildcard characters**--most notably the asterisk (*****)--you gain the ability to efficiently and accurately count **cells** based on partial text matches, whether your analysis involves a simple condition or highly intricate, multi-layered criteria.

These specialized **formulas** offer a robust and automated solution for extracting precise, actionable information from your spreadsheets, enabling you to derive deeper insights without resorting to manual filtering or time-consuming sorting procedures. The utility of this partial matching technique is broad and invaluable: from rapidly identifying specific keywords within customer feedback comments to systematically categorizing complex entries based on partial identifying **strings**.

We strongly recommend actively practicing these techniques using your own professional datasets. Experimentation with various **strings** and multiple combined conditions will solidify your understanding and allow you to fully appreciate the remarkable flexibility and analytical power that these native **COUNTIF** and **COUNTIFS** functions provide.

Additional Resources

To further advance your technical proficiency in **Google Sheets**, we encourage you to explore these related tutorials that cover other essential functions and data manipulation operations: