

How can I use FIND Function with Multiple Criteria in Excel?

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Understanding the Standard FIND Function

The FIND function in Excel is a powerful tool designed to help users locate specific characters within a text string. Specifically, it returns the numeric starting position of the first instance of a character or substring that you specify. This function is often indispensable for data cleaning, parsing complex text entries, and performing advanced conditional checks based on textual content.

By default, the **FIND** function is inherently constrained to searching for only one specific piece of criteria at a time. For instance, if you are looking for the letter "a", the formula will successfully return the position of the first "a" it encounters. However, the standard syntax does not permit the simultaneous inclusion of multiple target characters, severely limiting its utility when dealing with highly variable data formats or complex requirements where a match on any of several characters is desired.

The Challenge of Multiple Criteria Searching

In many real-world data analysis scenarios, simply searching for a single character is insufficient. You might need to determine the position of the first occurrence of any character from a predefined set--for example, finding the start of the first vowel, or the position of the first delimiter (like a comma, semicolon, or dash) used within a dataset. This type of requirement necessitates a creative workaround since the native **FIND** function lacks built-in multi-criteria capability.

To overcome this functional limitation, expert Excel users often employ nested functions, leveraging the power of substitution to normalize the search criteria. The fundamental strategy here is to transform all potential target characters into a single, uniform character before invoking the primary **FIND** operation. This sophisticated technique allows the standard function to operate effectively even when the search space includes numerous possible matches.

The Core Formula: Combining FIND and SUBSTITUTE

To successfully search for the first occurrence of one of several characters--let's use characters "a," "b," and "c" as our criteria set--in a specific cell (such as **A2**), we must nest the SUBSTITUTE function inside the **FIND** function. This clever combination forces **Excel** to temporarily standardize the cell content specifically for the search operation, ensuring that any match is treated equally.

Here is the highly efficient formula used to achieve this critical multi-criteria search:

```
=FIND("a",SUBSTITUTE(SUBSTITUTE(A2,"b","a"),"c","a"))
```

This formula performs an essential internal transformation: it first replaces every instance of "b"

with "a", and subsequently replaces every instance of "c" with "a". By the time the outermost FIND function executes, it is simply looking for the position of the letter "a" within the temporarily modified string. Since "a" now represents any of the original target characters ("a", "b", or "c"), the numeric result accurately reflects the position of the first match among the entire defined criteria set.

Specifically, this formula searches the contents of cell **A2** and returns the position of the first occurrence of any of the following characters:

- a**
- b**
- c**

Practical Example: Locating Characters in Team Names

To demonstrate the practical application of this technique, let us consider a typical dataset containing a list of basketball team names. Our objective is to efficiently locate the starting index of the first letter that matches any of our chosen criteria (a, b, or c) within each team name. This is a common requirement in text analysis where identifying the presence of specific markers is necessary.

Suppose we have the following list of basketball team names in Excel, organized neatly in column A:

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	Team					
2	Mavericks					
3	Cavs					
4	Celtics					
5	Hawks					
6	Lakers					
7	Grizzlies					
8	Knicks					
9	Warriors					
10	Rockets					
11						
12						
13						
14						
15						
16						
17						
18						

We are tasked with determining the position of the first occurrence of either an **a**, **b**, or **c** within these names. This scenario clearly illustrates why a simple, single-criteria search would fail, thereby justifying the necessity of our robust nested function approach to normalize the search space and yield accurate results.

Step-by-Step Implementation in Excel

To initiate the multi-criteria search process, we begin by entering the specialized formula into the first corresponding result cell, **B2**. This cell is designed to house the result for the team name listed in **A2**. The formula structure remains precisely the same as defined in the previous section, ensuring consistent execution:

```
=FIND("a",SUBSTITUTE(SUBSTITUTE(A2,"b","a"),"c","a"))
```

Once the formula is correctly entered into cell **B2**, we can propagate it across the remaining dataset using Excel's fill handle. By clicking and dragging the formula down through the required cells in column B, the cell references automatically adjust (e.g., A2 becomes A3, A4, and so on), completing the complex analysis for the entire list with a single action.

The resulting column B will then populate with the numeric positions, providing the exact index where the first match (a, b, or c) was found within each respective team name's string:

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Team	Position of first a, b, or c					
2	Mavericks	2					
3	Cavs	2					
4	Celtics	6					
5	Hawks	2					
6	Lakers	2					
7	Grizzlies	#VALUE!					
8	Knicks	4					
9	Warriors	2					
10	Rockets	3					
11							
12							
13							
14							
15							
16							
17							

Interpreting the Results and Handling Errors

The data presented in Column B provides definitive evidence of the formula's accuracy in locating the position of the first match among the criteria set (a, b, or c). A detailed inspection confirms the following outcomes:

The first match of an a, b, or c in "Mavericks" is successfully identified at position **2** (the letter 'a').

The first match of an a, b, or c in "Cavs" is also found at position **2** (the letter 'a').

The first match of an a, b, or c in "Celtics" is accurately located at position **6** (the letter 'c').

A key consideration when employing this technique is understanding how the formula handles instances where none of the specified characters are present in the source cell. If the text being analyzed (e.g., cell A2) contains neither 'a', 'b', nor 'c', the substitution process will occur, but the resulting string will still lack the target character "a". Consequently, the outermost FIND function will be unable to locate its required character. In this specific scenario, the formula returns the standard **#VALUE!** error, which serves as a clear indicator that no match was found based on the provided criteria set (a, b, or c).

Deep Dive: How the SUBSTITUTE Function Enables Multi-Criteria Search

The efficacy of this advanced technique is entirely dependent on the strategic use of the SUBSTITUTE function, which temporarily modifies the source text string specifically for the search operation. Let us revisit the formula structure to understand the flow of execution:

```
=FIND("a",SUBSTITUTE(SUBSTITUTE(A2,"b","a"),"c","a"))
```

The formula evaluation proceeds strictly from the innermost layer outward. First, the inner **SUBSTITUTE** function executes: it meticulously scans the contents of cell **A2** and replaces every occurrence of the second target character, "b", with the primary target character, "a". This critical step results in a new, intermediate string where the original 'a's and 'b's are now uniformly represented by 'a's. The length of the string remains unchanged.

Next, the outer **SUBSTITUTE** function takes this intermediate string as its input. It then replaces every occurrence of the third target character, "c", with the primary target character, "a". Following this second substitution step, the resulting string contains only 'a's wherever an original 'a', 'b', or 'c' existed, effectively normalizing the search criteria into a single character.

Finally, the outermost FIND function performs the simplest task: searching for the first occurrence of "a" in this modified string. Because all criteria were normalized to "a" while retaining their original spatial positions, the resulting index accurately pinpoints the starting position of the first character from the desired multi-criteria set.

Important Considerations: Case Sensitivity

It is fundamentally important for users employing the **FIND** function to remember its inherent behavior regarding case. Unlike its counterpart, the **SEARCH** function, the **FIND** function in Excel is always **case-sensitive**. This means that if you specify a search criterion of lowercase "a," the function will exclusively match "a" and will completely ignore any uppercase "A"s present in the cell content.

When utilizing the nested **SUBSTITUTE** approach for multi-criteria searching, this case sensitivity applies throughout the entire process. It governs both the characters you are replacing ("a," "b," "c") and the character you are replacing them with ("a"). If the requirement is to search for both lowercase 'a' and uppercase 'A', you would need to adjust the formula to incorporate both instances into your substitution chain (e.g., substituting 'A' with 'a' as well), or consider using the alternative **SEARCH** function, which is designed to be case-insensitive.

Excel: Use SEARCH Function to Search Multiple Values