

How to Easily Apply Conditional Formatting with Multiple Rules in Google Sheets

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Conditional formatting is an indispensable feature in Google Sheets, enabling users to automatically apply specific formats--such as changes in background color, text style, or borders--to cells that meet predefined criteria. While simple formatting based on a single condition (like "value is greater than X") is straightforward, mastering conditional formatting with **multiple conditions** significantly enhances data visualization and analysis capabilities. This powerful functionality allows complex logic to be applied across large datasets, highlighting trends, outliers, or specific data points instantly.

The standard approach involves selecting the target range, navigating to the **Format** menu, and selecting **Conditional formatting**. This process opens the side panel where individual rules are defined. However, when multiple, interconnected criteria must be evaluated simultaneously--requiring either that ALL conditions are met (**AND logic**) or that ANY of the conditions are met (**OR logic**)--the simple rule definitions fall short. This is where the utilization of a custom formula becomes essential, offering flexibility and computational power necessary for advanced data styling.

The key to executing sophisticated conditional formatting lies in harnessing the **custom formula** function within Google Sheets. A custom formula rule uses standard Sheet functions, like `AND()` or `OR()`, which must result in a Boolean value (TRUE or FALSE). If the formula evaluates to TRUE for the top-left cell of the applied range, the formatting is applied to that cell and then propagated down the rest of the range based on relative cell references. Understanding how to structure these formulas is crucial for success.

The following detailed guide provides comprehensive examples demonstrating how to use the custom formula function effectively in common, multi-condition scenarios. We will explore two primary structures that govern complex rule creation:

Conditional Formatting with OR logic: Highlighting cells if they match any of several specified values or meet one of several criteria.

Conditional Formatting with AND logic: Highlighting cells only if they meet all specified criteria simultaneously.

Let us delve into these powerful techniques to elevate your spreadsheet analysis.

The Foundational Steps for Applying Custom Formula Rules

Before diving into complex formulas, it is important to establish the correct procedure for initializing the conditional formatting rules panel. Consistency in these steps ensures that your logic is applied to the intended range without errors. Always begin by meticulously selecting the entire range of cells you intend to format. For instance, if you are formatting cells A2 through A100 based on

values in column A, select A2:A100. If you are formatting the entire row based on column A, select the full range (e.g., A2:Z100). This initial selection dictates the scope of your rule.

Once the range is selected, navigate to the **Format** tab in the menu bar and choose **Conditional formatting**. This action opens the rule editor panel on the right side of the screen. Within this panel, you will define the range (which should already be pre-filled based on your selection) and then, critically, select the rule type: **Custom formula is**. This selection unlocks the ability to use complex Boolean logic for your formatting decisions, moving beyond simple comparison operators.

When writing the custom formula, remember that the formula should always be written as if it is being applied only to the very first cell in your selected range. For example, if your selected range starts at A2, your formula must reference A2. Sheets automatically handles the relative referencing for all subsequent cells (A3, A4, A5, etc.) unless you explicitly use absolute references (e.g., \$A\$2) to lock a cell reference. This foundational understanding is crucial for correctly implementing both OR and AND logic across large datasets and ensuring the rule iterates correctly across every row.

Example 1: Implementing Conditional Formatting with OR Logic

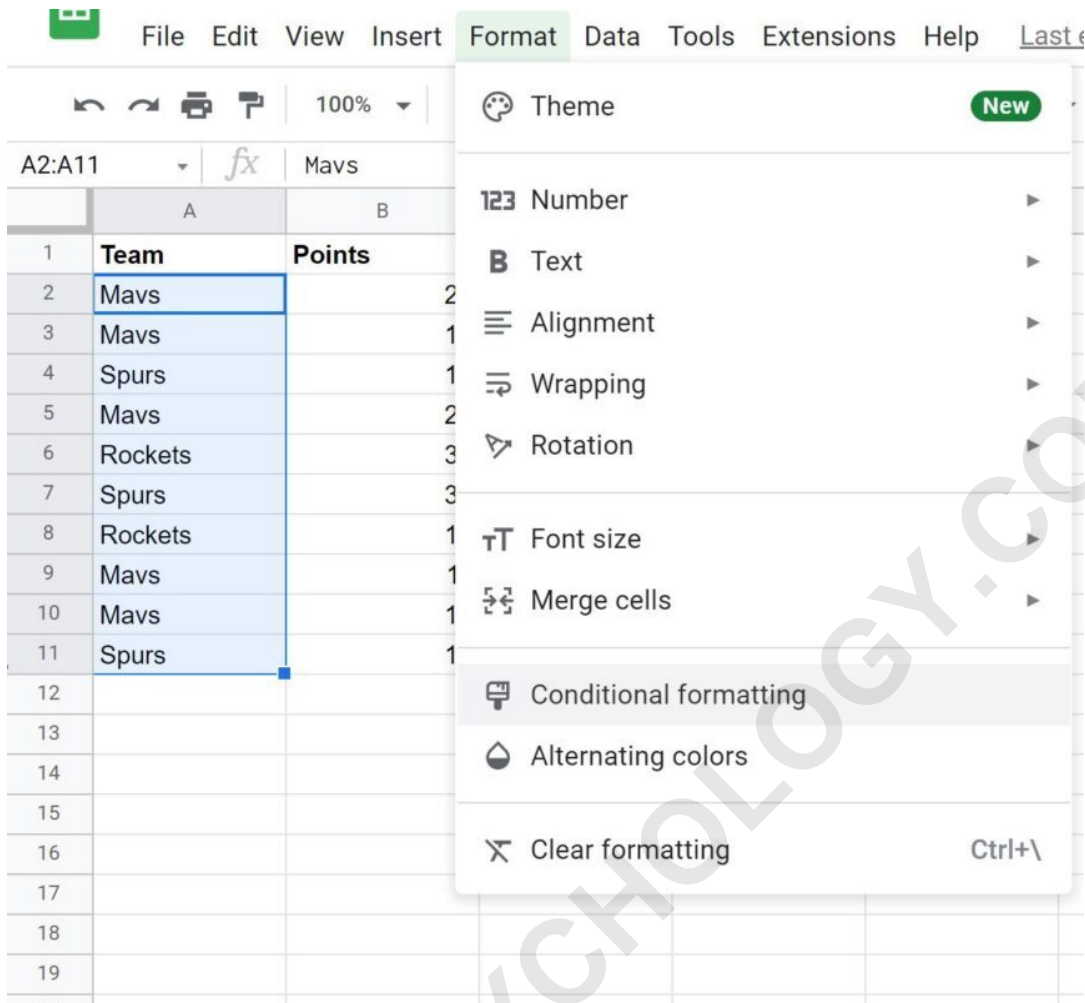
The purpose of utilizing OR logic in conditional formatting is to highlight a cell if it satisfies one criterion OR another criterion. This is incredibly useful when you need to visually group items that belong to a specified set of categories or values. In Google Sheets, there are two primary methods for implementing OR functionality: using the built-in `OR()` function or, for simple equality checks, using arithmetic summation.

Let us consider a practical scenario using a sports team dataset. Suppose we have a list of teams and their performance metrics, and we specifically want to highlight entries belonging to two particular teams: "Spurs" and "Rockets." This scenario requires the cell to be highlighted if the Team name equals "Spurs" OR if the Team name equals "Rockets."

Suppose we have the following dataset in Google Sheets, located in columns A and B:

	A	B	C	D
1	Team	Points		
2	Mavs	23		
3	Mavs	15		
4	Spurs	18		
5	Mavs	22		
6	Rockets	30		
7	Spurs	31		
8	Rockets	19		
9	Mavs	11		
10	Mavs	14		
11	Spurs	13		
12				
13				
14				
15				
16				
17				
18				
19				

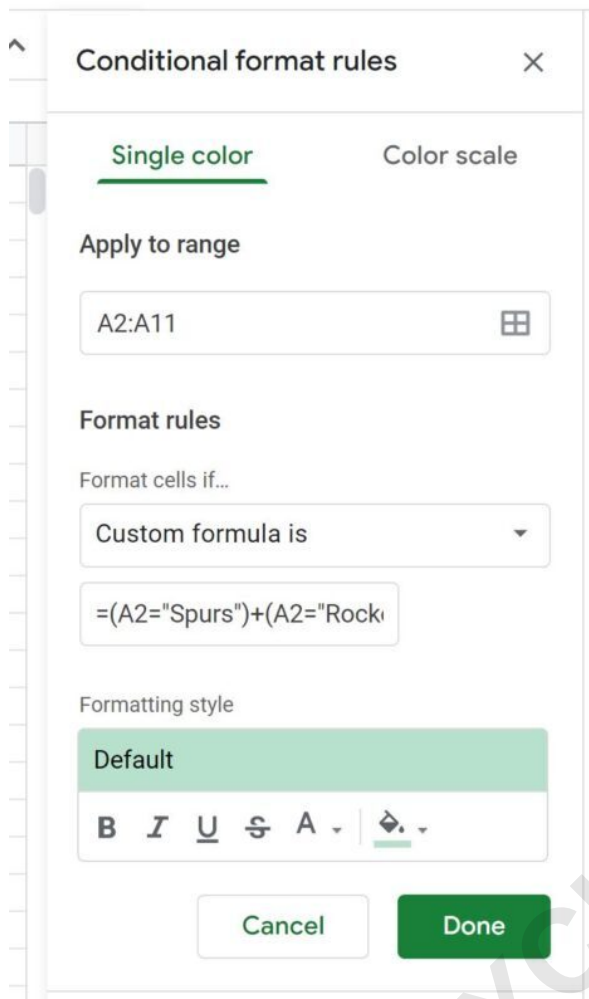
We aim to highlight each of the cells in the **Team** column where the name is either "Spurs" or "Rockets." To begin this process, we must highlight the intended range, which is **A2:A11**. Following the selection, we navigate through the menu by clicking the **Format** tab, and subsequently clicking **Conditional formatting**.



In the **Conditional format rules** panel that appears, we select the **Format cells if** dropdown menu and choose the **Custom formula is** option. Here, we can input the specific logic required to handle the multiple OR conditions. For simple equality checks, using arithmetic summation is a compact and efficient method. When Google Sheets evaluates a TRUE statement in a formula, it treats it as the number 1; a FALSE statement is treated as 0. If the sum of multiple equality checks is greater than zero, then at least one condition is TRUE, satisfying the OR logic required for formatting.

`=(A2="Spurs")+ (A2="Rockets")`

Alternatively, the standard `OR()` function could also be employed for the same result, especially if the conditions involved more complex comparisons (e.g., greater than or less than). The equivalent formula using the explicit function would be `=OR(A2="Spurs", A2="Rockets")`. Both methods achieve the same goal in this scenario, but the summation method shown above is often quicker to type for multiple simple equality checks, as it eliminates the need for the surrounding `OR()` function and its comma separation.



After entering the formula and defining the desired formatting (e.g., green background fill), clicking **Done** immediately applies the rule. As demonstrated below, every cell in the **Team** column that contains the text "Spurs" or "Rockets" is automatically highlighted, confirming the successful application of the OR logic rule. This method ensures that the data analysis is highly visual and instantly actionable, allowing analysts to quickly identify target groups within the dataset.

	A	B	C	D
1	Team	Points		
2	Mavs	23		
3	Mavs	15		
4	Spurs	18		
5	Mavs	22		
6	Rockets	30		
7	Spurs	31		
8	Rockets	19		
9	Mavs	11		
10	Mavs	14		
11	Spurs	13		
12				
13				
14				
15				
16				
17				
18				

Example 2: Implementing Conditional Formatting with AND Logic

Unlike OR logic, which is satisfied if any condition is met, AND logic requires that **all** specified conditions must be simultaneously TRUE for the formatting to be applied. This type of multi-criteria formatting is crucial for filtering data where intersectionality is key--for example, highlighting transactions that exceed a certain amount AND occurred after a specific date, or identifying inventory items that are low in stock AND have a high sales volume.

For this example, we will continue using the same dataset, but we will introduce a condition based on the **Points** column (Column B). Our specific goal is to highlight entries where the team is exactly "Spurs" AND the corresponding points value in column B is greater than 15. This requires two distinct criteria, referencing two separate columns, to be met for the formatting to trigger.

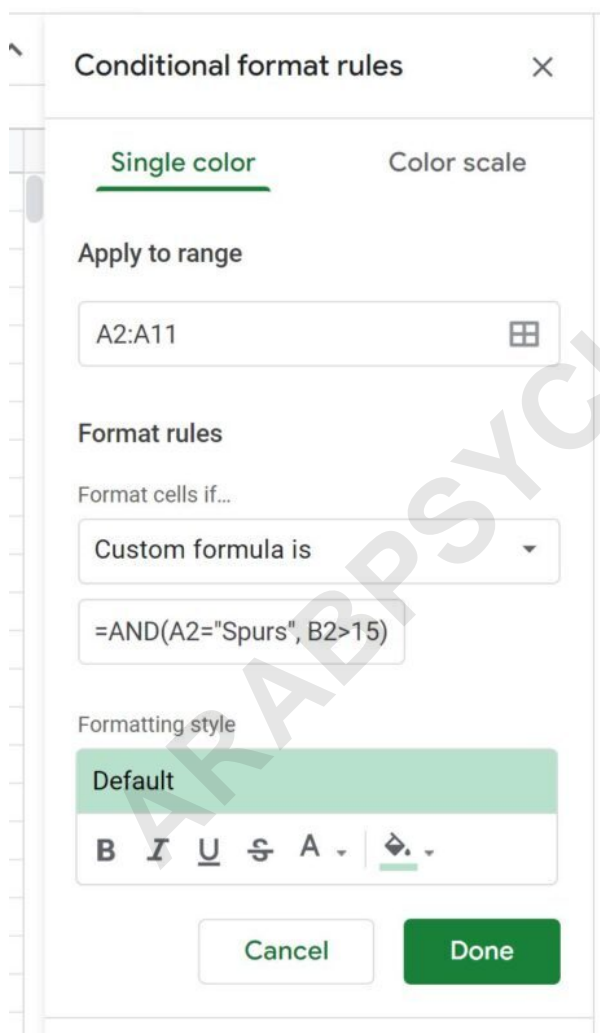
Using the same steps as before, we select the target range (A2:A11), open the **Conditional format rules** panel, and select **Custom formula is** from the dropdown menu. Since we require two different criteria to be true simultaneously, we must utilize the specific `AND()` function provided by Google Sheets. The `AND()` function takes multiple logical expressions as arguments and returns TRUE only if every single argument evaluates to TRUE.

The first criterion checks the team name in cell A2: `A2="Spurs"`. The second criterion checks the corresponding points in cell B2: `B2>15`. Since we are applying the formula to the entire range

starting at A2, we use these relative references. Placing both criteria inside the `AND()` function ensures the intersectional requirement is met, guaranteeing that only records meeting both criteria receive the formatting.

`=AND(A2="Spurs", B2>15)`

It is vital to note the correct referencing: A2 refers to the current Team cell being evaluated, and B2 refers to the Points cell in the same row. Because the formula is a custom formula applied to the range A2:A11, the references A2 and B2 will automatically shift row-by-row (becoming A3 and B3, A4 and B4, and so forth) as the rule is evaluated across the entire selected area. This relative referencing is a cornerstone of effective conditional formatting.



Upon clicking **Done**, the resulting formatting highlights only those rows associated with the "Spurs" where the points scored exceeded the threshold of 15. This demonstrates how **AND logic** provides highly targeted visualization, allowing users to isolate data points that meet complex, interwoven

criteria within the spreadsheet, such as high-performing teams.

	A	B	C	D
1	Team	Points		
2	Mavs	23		
3	Mavs	15		
4	Spurs	18		
5	Mavs	22		
6	Rockets	30		
7	Spurs	31		
8	Rockets	19		
9	Mavs	11		
10	Mavs	14		
11	Spurs	13		
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Combining AND and OR Logic for Complex Requirements

In many real-world data analysis scenarios, criteria are rarely purely AND or purely OR; they often involve a combination of both. For instance, you might need to highlight rows where the team is "Rockets" AND the points are less than 10, OR where the team is "Spurs" regardless of points. This requires nesting the `AND()` and `OR()` functions within a single custom formula.

The structure for nested logic places the specific, detailed requirements inside the `AND()` function, and then these entire `AND()` clauses are wrapped inside the overarching `OR()` function. For the scenario described above (Highlight if (Team is Rockets AND Points < 10) OR (Team is Spurs)), the formula applied starting at A2 would look like this:

```
=OR(AND(A2="Rockets", B2<10), A2="Spurs")
```

This complex rule ensures maximum flexibility in data presentation. The use of parentheses is paramount when nesting these logical functions, as they clearly define which criteria must be satisfied together (the inner AND clauses) before the overall OR decision is made. Misplaced parentheses are the most common source of error in multi-criteria conditional formatting. Always test your formula in a standard cell first to ensure it returns the correct TRUE/FALSE Boolean

value before applying it as a formatting rule, verifying that the logic correctly aligns with your analytical needs.

Utilizing Absolute and Relative References Effectively

A nuanced understanding of cell referencing is necessary when the criteria for formatting one range depends on static values, or on values outside the main data set. When you use the syntax `A2`, this is a **relative reference**, meaning it changes (`A3`, `A4`, etc.) as the rule is applied down the rows. When you use `A2`, this is an **absolute reference**, meaning it always refers specifically to cell `A2`, regardless of which cell the formatting rule is currently evaluating across the entire selected range.

The mixed reference, such as `$A2` (absolute column, relative row) or `A$2` (relative column, absolute row), is particularly valuable when applying rules across entire rows. For instance, if you want to highlight an entire row (e.g., `A2:Z100`) based on a condition only in Column A, you must ensure that your reference to Column A is fixed (absolute column) but the row reference is allowed to change (relative row). The formula must use `$A2`. This ensures that every cell across the entire row (`B2`, `C2`, `D2`...) checks the value found specifically in `A2`, while still allowing the formula to correctly move down to `A3`, `A4`, etc., for the next rows.

Failing to use absolute column references when formatting full rows based on a single column criterion will lead to errors, as cell `B2` will incorrectly check column B, cell `C2` will check column C, and so on. Always examine the scope of your rule and whether the column or row index needs to be fixed using the dollar sign (`$`). This precision elevates the quality and reliability of complex conditional formatting implementation and is essential for dynamic spreadsheet design.

Best Practices and Troubleshooting Complex Rules

When working with intricate conditional formatting rules in Google Sheets, adherence to best practices minimizes errors and maximizes efficiency. Firstly, limit the number of rules applied to a single range. While Sheets supports numerous rules, too many complex custom formulas can impact spreadsheet performance, leading to noticeable lag, especially in large files. Prioritize your most important rules and consider if simpler built-in rules can handle less critical formatting needs, reserving custom formulas for true multi-condition logic.

Secondly, always manage the order of rules. Conditional formatting rules are evaluated sequentially from top to bottom in the sidebar panel. If a cell satisfies the criteria for Rule 1, the formatting is applied, and subsequent rules for that specific cell are typically ignored (unless the subsequent rule is explicitly set to continue evaluation). If you have conflicting rules (e.g., Rule 1 formats cells `> 10` as blue, and Rule 2 formats cells `> 5` as green), ensure the more specific or critical rule is listed first so it takes precedence over broader, overlapping rules.

Finally, debugging custom formulas requires systematic testing. If a complex formula is not working, temporarily paste the formula into an empty cell outside your data range, making sure to adjust the starting reference (e.g., A2) to match the cell you are testing. Examine the resulting output: if it returns TRUE/FALSE correctly, the formula logic is sound, and the error likely lies in the range selection or reference type (absolute vs. relative). If it returns an error value (like #VALUE! or #N/A), the syntax needs correction, potentially related to improper function nesting or mismatched data types, which must be resolved before applying the rule broadly.

Mastering the integration of **AND logic** and **OR logic** using the custom formula feature provides unparalleled control over data visualization, transforming raw data into instantly understandable insights, making complex spreadsheet analysis a far more efficient process for any user.

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