

## Using synonyms in Search Visualiser, part 1

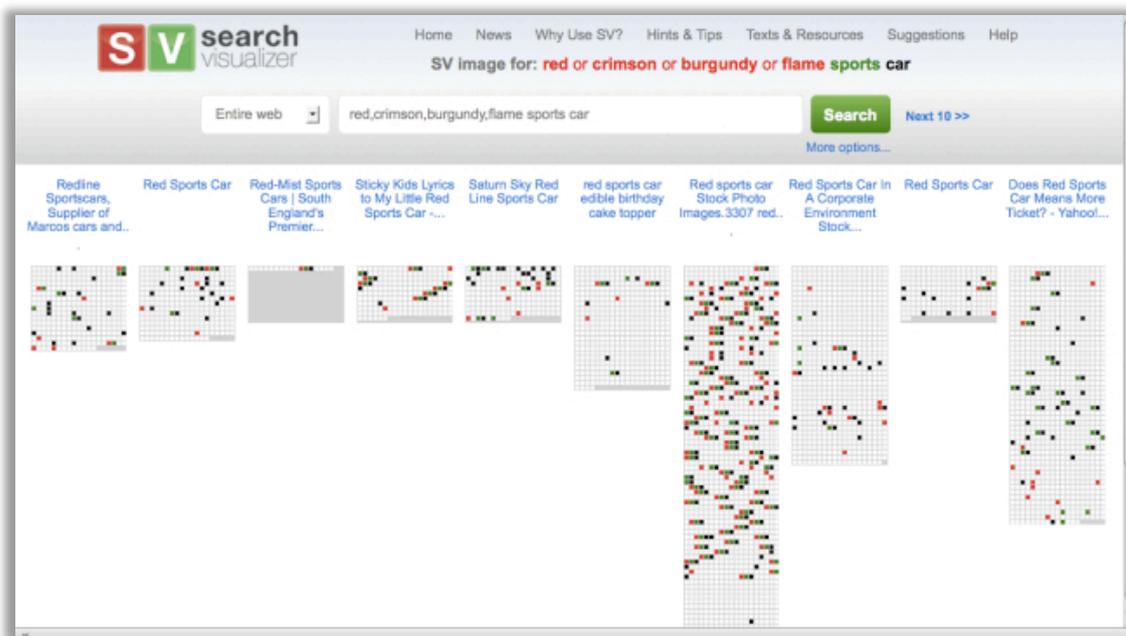
By Gordon Rugg

*Background: Search Visualiser has a simple way of handling search for synonyms. This article gives an introduction to the basic concepts.*

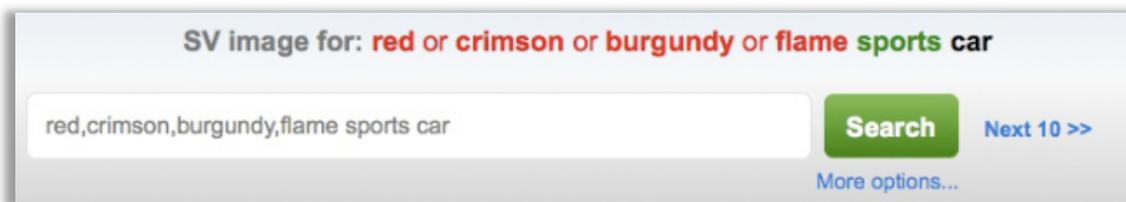
*This article was originally posted on May 27, 2012*

The “synonym” feature in SV allows you to treat any words you want as synonyms of each other. It’s a very powerful feature, and easy to use. You enter each of the words that you’re treating as synonyms into the keyword box, separated by commas, without spaces between them.

The SV synonym feature doesn’t care whether a dictionary would consider your chosen synonyms to be “proper” synonyms; you can decide to treat black and white as synonyms of each other if you want. Here are some examples that show what you can do with this feature.



The first example is a traditional synonym match. Imagine that you’re looking for a red sports car; with this feature, you can enter a variety of words as synonyms for *red*, such as *crimson* and *burgundy*. Your keywords would look like this: *red,crimson,burgundy,flame sports car*. (Note commas without spaces between the synonyms.)



SV shows you your keywords colour-coded, so you can check that the synonyms are coming out correctly.

If you're treating colours as synonyms, then it's a good idea to think about the order in which you enter them as keywords, so that the colour of the SV squares bears some resemblance to the colours in your synonym list. Otherwise, you'll encounter what's known in psychology as the Stroop effect, which can make life needlessly complicated.

The second example shows how choosing your own synonyms gives you more power than using an automatic thesaurus synonym function. Suppose that you're looking for a colourful jacket, but you're not particularly bothered about what that colour is. You can treat colours that you consider bright as synonyms of each other, and colours that you consider dull as a different set of synonyms. Your keywords might then look like this:

*red,orange,yellow,green* as synonyms for bright colours, and *black,white,grey,brown,beige* as synonyms for drab colours.



This feature is a useful companion to the “whole word match” option, for cases where you don't want to use the “partial word match” option because of the risk of false hits. For instance, if you're searching for the word *sing*, then the partial word match option would return a match from the word *single*; however, the whole word match for *sing* wouldn't return a match from *singer*. A simple solution is to use the whole word match option, and then to treat all the relevant terms such as *singer*, *singing* etc as synonyms. That will catch all the variant forms, without false positives.

This feature is powerful, and gives you a lot of flexibility; experimenting with it is well worth while.

### Hints and tips

An easy mistake is to put a space before one of the synonyms, which means that SV treats it as a different keyword, not a synonym. We could have reduced the risk of this by redesigning so that each keyword has a separate input box, or some other arrangement, but that would have increased the complexity of the interface, so we've gone for this simpler design. This is why SV shows you your keywords colour-coded, so you can check easily for whether you've mis-typed one of your synonyms.

If you're using synonyms a lot, you might want to try keeping a list of useful synonyms in a separate document, with each set of synonyms in a separate line, already in SV format, separated by commas. That way, you can easily copy and paste them into the keyword input box.

Synonyms can be useful when you're searching for names that have variant forms – e.g. *Robert,Rob,Robby,Robbie,Bob,Bobs*

Synonyms can also be useful if you're searching through texts that have a lot of typos in them, or if you're searching for a word that's often mis-spelled; you simply treat each of the likely mis-spellings as a synonym of the correct spelling.

If you're searching for hits in more than one language, then it's tempting to treat the different language forms of each word as synonyms of each other (e.g. *holiday,vacance,Ferien house,maison,Haus*). This isn't usually a good idea, because the place where you're most likely to encounter all those words together is in an online dictionary, which will mess up your search by being big and slow-loading. It's usually wiser to do a separate search in each language.

**Notes:**

The Search Visualiser is available for online use, free, at:  
[www.searchvisualiser.com](http://www.searchvisualiser.com)