

Using synonym search in Search Visualiser

By Gordon Rugg

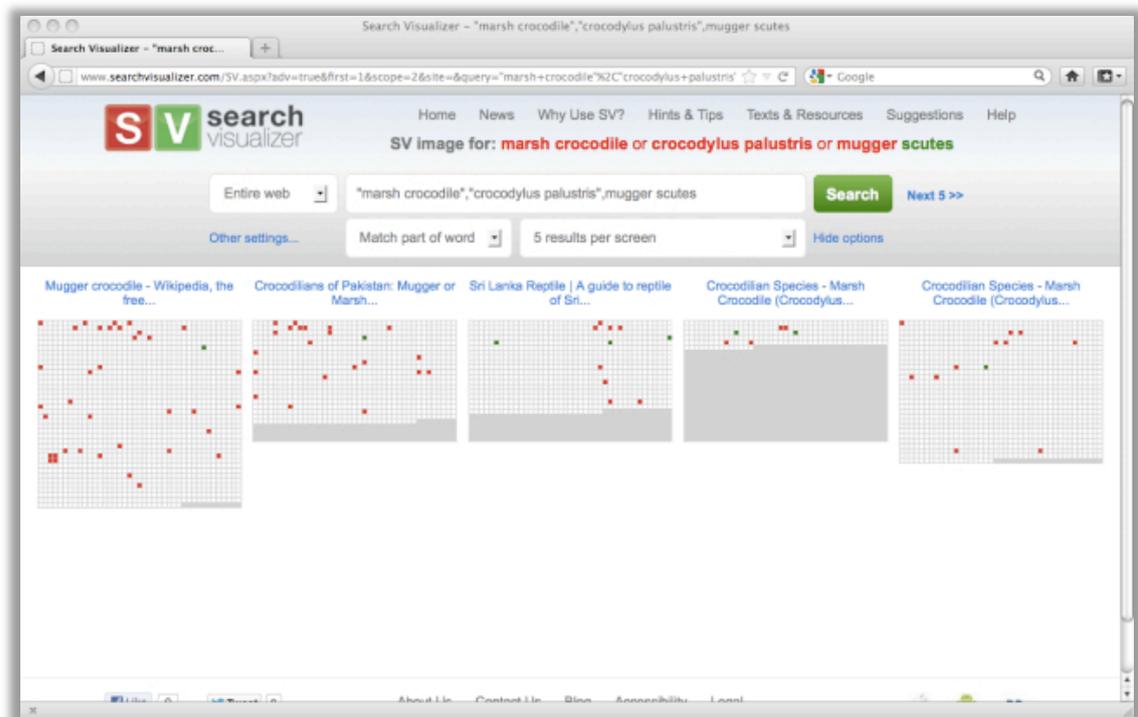
Background: This article gives hints and tips, with examples, on using synonym search in Search Visualiser.

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Searching for synonyms with standard search engines can quickly become complicated, particularly if you're searching for synonymous phrases, as opposed to single words which are synonymous.

It's possible to search for synonymous phrases within Search Visualiser by using a combination of the phrase-handling feature and the synonym feature. The example we'll use is a search involving the marsh crocodile, also known as *Crocodylus palustris*, also known as the mugger.

Image: An SV screenshot of a combined phrase and synonym search



Almost all of the individual words in this search are common, so being able to search for terms as phrases is important. If you search for the words “marsh” and “crocodile” separately, as opposed to the phrase “marsh crocodile” then you’re likely to get a huge number of irrelevant hits which are about marshes and/or about crocodiles, but which are not about the type of crocodile known as the “marsh crocodile”.

However, some records will refer to this animal as the “marsh crocodile” whereas others will refer to it as “*Crocodylus palustris*” and some will refer to it by its other name, the “mugger”. You’d therefore want to be able to treat all three of these terms as synonyms.

To show how this works, we’ll also add a separate search keyword; we’ll suppose that you’re trying to find out about the distribution of scutes (bony external scales) in this species.

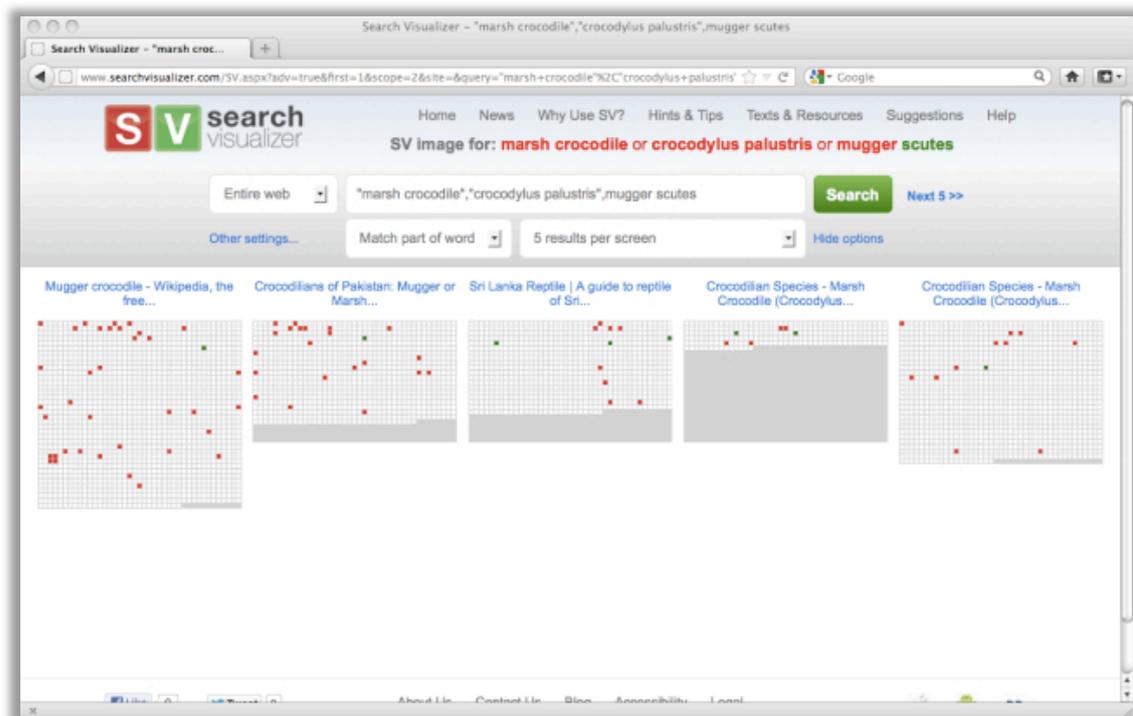
With SV, you handle the synonyms by putting each synonymous phrase within inverted commas, and separating each synonym with a comma, without spaces, like this:

“marsh crocodile”,“Crocodylus palustris”,mugger

You’d then add the other keyword after a space, giving you this search string:

“marsh crocodile”,“Crocodylus palustris”,mugger scutes

When you enter that as an SV search, you get the following results (I’ve used the “5 records per screen” option).



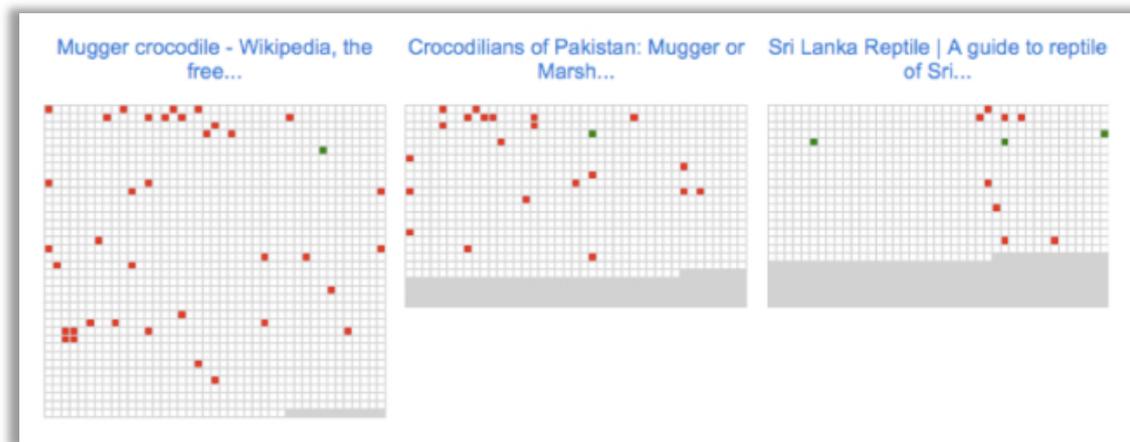
If you’re new to SV, then the explanation of what you’re seeing is as follows.

The Search Visualiser has done an Internet search, and is showing you five records (in this case, the first five that it’s found).

Each of the five chunks of text in blue in the middle of the screen is a link to the url of the corresponding record.

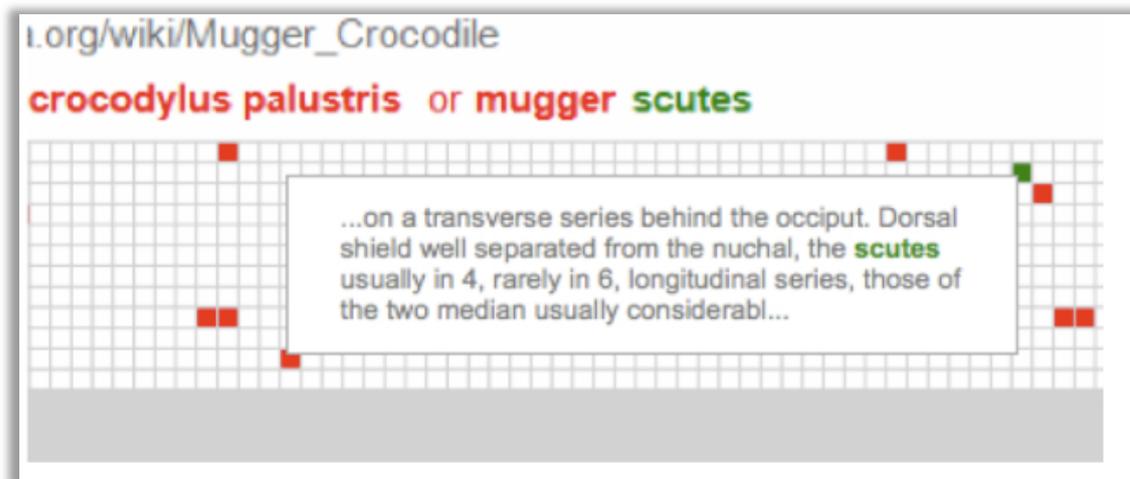
Beneath each blue link is a rectangle looking like a grey mosaic with occasional red and green squares. Each rectangle is in effect a miniaturised image of the record itself, showing each of your keywords with colour-coded highlighter. You can therefore see how long each record is, and how often each keyword occurs within each record, and where the keywords occur relative to each other. We can immediately see, for instance, that the various terms for the crocodile (red squares) are very common within all five records, but that there are very few mentions of scutes (green squares). The image below shows this in more detail.

The first three records are these:



The Wikipedia article and the “Crocodilians of Pakistan” article both only mention scutes once.

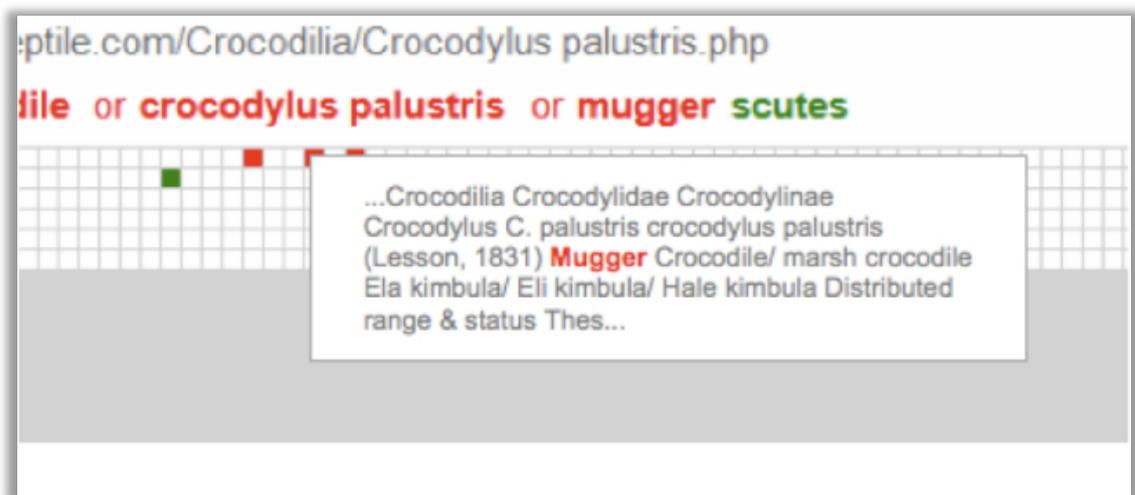
When you use the “enlarge record” option by clicking on the Wikipedia record and then hovering over the mention of “scutes” you get this (I’ve cropped and zoomed for clarity):



When you do the same with the Sri Lanka Reptile record, hovering over the second of the three mentions of “scutes” you get this: (again, cropped and zoomed for clarity).



When you see squares representing two or more synonyms occurring close together in a record, it's often an indication that the record is listing the synonyms. That's the case in the Sri Lanka Reptile record, as shown below.



You can use this combination of synonym search and phrase search together with other SV features, such as searching in other languages. (As usual, it's a good idea not to treat words from different languages as synonyms of each other unless you're fairly sure they're likely to occur within the same document, because of the risk of tangling with an online dictionary.)

Notes:

The Search Visualiser is available for online use, free, at:
www.searchvisualiser.com