Entrez Direct Reference: Command Line Access
to NCBI Entrez Databases

Searching, retrieving, and parsing data from NCBI databases through the Unix command line
Introduction

Entrez Direct (EDirect) provides access to the NCBI's suite of interconnected databases from a Unix terminal window. Search terms are entered as command-line arguments. Individual operations are connected with Unix pipes to allow construction of multi-step queries. Selected records can then be retrieved in a variety of formats.

EDirect also includes an argument-driven utility that simplifies the extraction of results in structured XML or JSON format, and a program that builds a URL from command-line arguments for easy access to external CGI data services. These can eliminate the need for writing custom software to answer ad hoc questions.

Queries can move seamlessly between EDirect programs and Unix utilities or scripts to perform actions that cannot be accomplished entirely within Entrez.

Programmatic Access

EDirect connects to Entrez through the Entrez Programming Utilities interface. It supports searching by indexed terms, looking up precomputed neighbors or links, filtering results by date or category, and downloading record summaries or reports. The same functionalities are available on the web or when using programmatic methods.

EDirect navigation programs (esearch, elink, efilter, and efetch) communicate by means of a small structured message, which can be passed invisibly between operations with a Unix pipe. The message includes the current database, so it does not need to be given as an argument after the first step.

All EDirect programs are designed to work on large sets of data. Intermediate results are stored on the Entrez history server. For best performance, obtain an API Key from NCBI, and place the following line in your .bash_profile configuration file:

```
export NCBI_API_KEY=user_api_key_goes_here
```

Each program also has a -help command that prints detailed information about available arguments.
Navigation Functions

Esearch performs a new Entrez search using terms in indexed fields. It requires a \texttt{\textbf{-db}} argument for the database name and uses \texttt{\textbf{-query}} to obtain the search terms. For PubMed, without field qualifiers, the server uses automatic term mapping to compose a search strategy by translating the supplied query:

\begin{verbatim}
esearch -db pubmed -query "selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor"
\end{verbatim}

Search terms can also be qualified with bracketed field names:

\begin{verbatim}
esearch -db nucleotide -query "insulin [PROT] AND rodents [ORGN]"
\end{verbatim}

Elink looks up precomputed neighbors within a database, or finds associated records in other databases:

\begin{verbatim}
elink -related
elink -target gene
\end{verbatim}

or can follow PubMed references in the NIH Open Citation Collection dataset (see PMID 31600197):

\begin{verbatim}
elink -cited
elink -cites
\end{verbatim}

Efilter limits the results of a previous query, with shortcuts that can also be used in esearch:

\begin{verbatim}
efilter -molecule genomic -location chloroplast -country sweden -days 365
\end{verbatim}

Ef fetch downloads selected records or reports in a designated format:

\begin{verbatim}
efetch -format abstract
\end{verbatim}

Individual query commands are connected by a Unix vertical bar pipe symbol:

\begin{verbatim}
esearch -db pubmed -query "tn3 transposition immunity" | efetch -format medline
\end{verbatim}

Discovery by Entrez Navigation

PubMed related articles are calculated by a statistical algorithm using the title, abstract, and medical subject headings (MeSH terms). These connections between papers can be used for knowledge discovery.

Lycopene cyclase converts lycopene to $\beta$-carotene, the immediate precursor of vitamin A. An initial search on the enzyme results in 244 articles. Looking up precomputed neighbors returns 14,728 PubMed papers, some of which might be expected to discuss adjacent steps in the biosynthetic pathway:

\begin{verbatim}
esearch -db pubmed -query "lycopene cyclase" | elink -related
\end{verbatim}

Linking to the protein database finds 311,490 sequence records, each of which has standardized organism information from the NCBI taxonomy. Limiting to curated proteins in mice returns 25 records:

\begin{verbatim}
elink -target protein | ef filter -organism mouse -source refseq |
\end{verbatim}

(Animals do not encode the genes involved in carotene biosynthesis, except for aphids and their ilk, apparently obtained by horizontal gene transfer from fungi.)

Records are then retrieved in FASTA format:

\begin{verbatim}
efetch -format fasta
\end{verbatim}

As anticipated, the results include the enzyme that splits $\beta$-carotene into two molecules of retinal:
The entire set of commands runs in 8 seconds. There is no need to use a script to loop over records one at a time, or write code to retry after a transient network failure, or add a time delay between requests. All of these features are already built into the EDirect commands.

**Structured Data Extraction**

The ability to obtain Entrez records in structured XML format, and to easily extract the underlying data, allows the user to ask novel questions that are not addressed by existing analysis software.

The `xtract` program uses command-line arguments to direct the conversion of XML data into a tab-delimited table. The `-pattern` argument divides the results into rows, while placement of data into columns is controlled by `-element`. Explicit paths to objects are not needed.

Formatting commands allow extensive customization of the output. The line break between -pattern output rows can be changed with `-ret`, and the tab character between -element fields can be replaced by `-tab`. The `-sep` argument is used to distinguish multiple elements of the same type, and controls their separation independently of the -tab command. The `-sep` value also applies to unrelated -element arguments that are grouped with commas. The following query:

```
  efetch -db pubmed -id 6271474,1413997,16589597 -format docsum |
  xtract -pattern DocumentSummary -sep "|" -element Id PubDate Name
```

returns a table with individual author names separated by vertical bars:

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Id</th>
<th>PubDate</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6271474</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Casadaban MJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1413997</td>
<td>1992 Oct</td>
<td>Mortimer RK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16589597</td>
<td>1954 Dec</td>
<td>Garber ED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

Selection commands are derivatives of -element. These include positional commands (-first and -last), numeric operations (including -num, -len, -inc, -sum, -min, -max, and -avg), text processing variants (such as -encode, -plain, -upper, -title, and -words), and functions that perform sequence or coordinate conversion (-revcomp, -0-based, -1-based, and -ucsc-based).

**Exploration of XML Sets**

Exploration commands (-pattern, -group, -block, and -subset) provide fine control over the order in which XML objects are examined. The command names are ranked in a precedence hierarchy:

```
  pattern > group > block > subset
```

and are combined in series to visit progressively smaller XML subregions, presenting each instance of a target object separately. This design enables a linear representation of "nested for-loop" functionality.

Records retrieved in PubmedArticle XML format:

```
  efetch -db pubmed -id 1413997 -format xml |
```

have authors with separate fields for last name and initials:

```
<Author>
  <LastName>Mortimer</LastName>
  <Initials>RK</Initials>
</Author>
```
Without being given any guidance about context, an -element command on initials and last names:

```
xtract -pattern PubmedArticle -element Initials LastName
```

will explore the current record for each argument in turn, and would thus print all author initials followed by all author last names:

```
RK CR JS Mortimer Contopoulou King
```

Inserting a -block command redirects data exploration to consider each author one at a time. The subsequent -element command only sees the current author's values:

```
xtract -pattern PubmedArticle -block Author -element Initials LastName
```

which restores the correct association of initials and last names:

```
RK Mortimer CR Contopoulou JS King
```

Using a comma to combine the two arguments of -element into a group:

```
xtract -pattern PubmedArticle -block Author -sep " " -element Initials,LastName
```

allows -sep to produce a more desirable formatting of author names:

```
RK Mortimer CR Contopoulou JS King
```

**Nested Exploration**

MeSH terms can have their own unique set of qualifiers, with a major topic attribute on each object:

```
<MeshHeading>  
<DescriptorName MajorTopicYN="N">beta-Galactosidase</DescriptorName>  
<QualifierName MajorTopicYN="Y">genetics</QualifierName>  
<QualifierName MajorTopicYN="N">metabolism</QualifierName>  
</MeshHeading>
```

Since -element does its own exploration for objects within its current scope, a -block command:

```
-block MeshHeading -sep " / " -element DescriptorName,QualifierName
```

is sufficient for grouping each MeSH name with its qualifiers:

```
beta-Galactosidase / genetics / metabolism
```

Adding -subset commands within the -block visits each individual descriptor or qualifier object on the current MeSH term:

```
efetch -db pubmed -id 6162838 -format xml |  
xtract -transform <( echo -e "Y\t*\n") \  
-block PubmedArticle -element MedlineCitation/Pmid \  
-block MeshHeading -clr \  
-subset DescriptorName -plg "\n" -tab "\" \  
-subset QualifierName -plg " / " -tab "\" \  
-translate @MajorTopicYN -element DescriptorName \  
-translate @MajorTopicYN -element QualifierName
```

and keeps major topic attributes associated with their parent objects. A text translation command converts the "Y" attribute value to an asterisk for printing:

```
6162838  
Base Sequence  
*DNA, Recombinant  
Escherichia coli / genetics  
...  
RNA, Messenger / *genetics
```
Conditional Execution

Conditional processing commands (-if, -unless, -and, -or, and -else) restrict exploration by object name and value. These may be used in conjunction with string or numeric constraints:

```
esearch -db pubmed -query "Casadaban MJ [AUTH]" |
efetch -format xml |
xtract -pattern PubmedArticle -if "#Author" -lt 6 \
   -block Author -if LastName -is-not Casadaban \
   -sep ", " -tab "\n" -element LastName,Initials |
sort-uniq-count-rank
```

to select papers with fewer than 6 authors and print a table of the most frequent coauthors:

```
11    Chou, J
  8     Cohen, SN
  7     Groisman, EA
  4     Darzins, A
  3     Castilho, BA
...```

Saving Data in Variables

A value can be recorded in a variable and used wherever needed. Variables are created by a hyphen followed by a name consisting of a string of capital letters or digits (e.g., -PMID). Values are retrieved by placing an ampersand before the variable name (e.g., "&PMID") in an -element statement:

```
efetch -db pubmed -id 3201829,6301692,781293 -PMID \n   -block Author -element "&PMID" | 
xtract -pattern PubmedArticle -PMID MedlineCitation/PMID \ 
    -sep " " -tab "\n" -element Initials,LastName
```

producing a list of authors, with the PubMed Identifier in the first column of each row:

```
3201829    JR Johnston
3201829    CR Contopoulou
3201829    RK Mortimer
6301692    MA Krasnow
6301692    NR Cozzarelli
781293     MJ Casadaban
```

The variable can be used even though the original object is no longer visible inside the -block section.

Sequence Qualifiers

The NCBI represents sequence records in a data model based on the central dogma of molecular biology. A sequence can have multiple features, which contain information about the biology of a given region, including the transformations involved in gene expression. Each feature can have multiple qualifiers, which store specific details about that feature (e.g., name of the gene, genetic code used for translation, accession of the product sequence).

The data hierarchy is explored using a -pattern {sequence} -group {feature} -block {qualifier} construct. As a convenience, an -insd helper function generates the appropriate nested extraction commands from feature and qualifier names on the command line. For example, processing the results of a search on cone snail venom:

```
esearch -db protein -query "conotoxin" -feature mat_peptide |
efetch -format gpc |
xtract -insd complete mat_peptide "%peptide" product mol_wt peptide |
```
grep -i conotoxin | sort -t $'	' -u -k 2,2n

returns the accession, peptide length, product name, calculated molecular weight, and sequence for a sample of neurotoxic peptides:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accession</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Product Name</th>
<th>Molecular Weight</th>
<th>Sequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ADB43313.1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>conotoxin Cal 1b</td>
<td>1708</td>
<td>LCCKRHHGCHPCGRT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADB43328.1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>conotoxin Cal 5.1</td>
<td>1829</td>
<td>DPAPCCQHPIETCCRR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC77105.1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>conotoxin Lt1.4</td>
<td>1705</td>
<td>GCCSPHPACDVNNPDICG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADB43329.1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>conotoxin Cal 5.2</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>MIQRSQCAVKKKNCHV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADD97803.1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>conotoxin Cal 1.2</td>
<td>2206</td>
<td>AGCCPTIMYKTGACRTNRCR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC77085.1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>conotoxin Bt14.8</td>
<td>2574</td>
<td>NECDNMRSCFSMIYEKCRRL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADB43325.1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>conotoxin Cal 14.2</td>
<td>2157</td>
<td>GCPADCPNTCDSSNKCSGPFGP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC77154.1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>conotoxin Bt14.19</td>
<td>2578</td>
<td>VREKDCPPHPVPMHKCVCLKTC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Genes in a Region**

To list all genes between two markers flanking the human X chromosome centromere, first retrieve the chromosome record:

```
esearch -db gene -query "Homo sapiens [ORGN] AND X [CHR]" |
efilter -status alive -type coding | efetch -format docsum |
```

Gene names and chromosomal positions are extracted by piping the record to:

```
xtract -pattern DocumentSummary -NME Name -DSC Description \
-block GenomicInfoType -if ChrLoc -equals X \
-min ChrStart,ChrStop -element "&NME" "&DSC" |
```

Exploring each GenomicInfoType is needed because of pseudoautosomal regions at the ends of the X and Y chromosomes. Without limiting to chromosome X, the copy of IL9R near the "q" telomere of chromosome Y would be erroneously placed with genes that are near the X chromosome centromere.

Results can now be sorted, filtered, and passed to the between-two-genes script:

```
sort -k 1,1n | cut -f 2- | 
grep -v pseudogene | grep -v uncharacterized | 
between-two-genes AMER1 FAAH2
```

to produce a table of known genes located between the two markers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FAAH2</td>
<td>fatty acid amide hydrolase 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPIN2A</td>
<td>spindlin family member 2A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZXB</td>
<td>zinc finger X-linked duplicated B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLRP2B</td>
<td>NLR family pyrin domain containing 2B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZXD</td>
<td>zinc finger X-linked duplicated A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPIN4</td>
<td>spindlin family member 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARHGEF9</td>
<td>Cdc42 guanine nucleotide exchange factor 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMER1</td>
<td>APC membrane recruitment protein 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Genes in a Pathway**

A gene can be linked to the biochemical pathways in which it participates:

```
esearch -db gene -query "PAH [GENE]" -organism human |
elink -target biosystems |
efilter -pathway wikipathways |
```

Linking from a pathway record back to the gene database:

```
elink -target gene |
efetch -format docsum |
xtract -pattern DocumentSummary -element Name Description |
grep -v pseudogene | grep -v uncharacterized |
sort -f
```

returns the set of all genes known to be involved in the pathway:
AANAT      aralkylamine N-acetyltransferase
ACADM      acyl-CoA dehydrogenase medium chain
ACHE       acetylcholinesterase (Cartwright blood group)
ADCYAP1    adenylate cyclase activating polypeptide 1

**Gene Sequence**

Genes encoded on the minus strand of a sequence:

```bash
esearch -db gene -query "DDT [GENE] AND mouse [ORGN]" |
efetch -format docsum |
xtract -pattern GenomicInfoType -element ChrAccVer ChrStart ChrStop |
```

have coordinates where the start position is greater than the stop:

```
NC_000076.6 75773373 75771232
```

These can be read by a "while" loop:

```bash
while IFS=\'\t\' read acn str stp do
efetch -db nucleotide -format gb -id "$acn" -chr_start "$str" -chr_stop "$stp"
done
```

to return the reverse-complemented subregion in GenBank format:

```
LOCUS       NC_000076               2142 bp DNA  linear  CON 08-AUG-2019
DEFINITION  Mus musculus strain C57BL/6J chromosome 10, GRCm38.p6 C57BL/6J.
ACCESSION   NC_000076 REGION: complement(75771233..75773374)
VERSION     NC_000076.6
FEATURES             Location/Qualifiers
  source          1..2142
                   /organism="Mus musculus"
                   /mol_type="genomic DNA"
                   /strain="C57BL/6J"
                   /db_xref="taxon:10090"
                   /chromosome="10"
  gene            1..2142
                   /gene="Ddt"
  mRNA            join(1..159,462..637,1869..2142)
                   /gene="Ddt"
                   /product="D-dopachrome tautomerase"
                   /transcript_id="NM_010027.1"
  CDS             join(52..159,462..637,1869..1941)
                   /gene="Ddt"
                   /codon_start=1
                   /product="D-dopachrome decarboxylase"
                   /protein_id="NP_034157.1"
                   /translation="MPFVELETNLPSRIPAGLENRLCAATATILKDPEDRVSVTIRPGMTLLMNKSTEPCAHLLVSSIGVGTAEQRTHSASFFKFLTEELSLSQDDQDRIFPFP"
```

The reverse complement of a plus-strand sequence range can be selected with efetch -revcomp.

**Recursive Definitions**

When a recursively defined object is given to an exploration command:

```bash
efetch -db taxonomy -id 9606,7227,10090 -format xml |
xtract -pattern Taxon -element TaxId ScientificName
```

the -element command only examines fields in the outermost objects:

```
9606    Homo sapiens
7227    Drosophila melanogaster
10090   Mus musculus
```
The **star-slash-child** construct will descend a single level into the hierarchy:

```
  efetch -db taxonomy -id 9606,7227,10090 -format xml |
  xtract -pattern Taxon -block "*/Taxon" \ 
  -if Rank -is-not "no rank" \ 
  -tab \\
  -element TaxId,Rank,ScientificName
```

to print data on the individual lineage objects:

```
  2759    superkingdom       Eukaryota
  33208   kingdom           Metazoa
  7711    phylum            Chordata
  89593   subphylum         Cephalochordata
  8287    superclass        Sarcopterygii
  40674   class             Mammalia
  ...
```

Recursive objects can be fully explored with a **double-star-slash-child** construct:

```
  esearch -db gene -query "rbcL [GENE] AND maize [ORGN]" | 
  efetch -format xml | 
  xtract -pattern Entrezgene -block "*/Gene-commentary" \
```

Metadata annotated in an attribute:

```
<Gene-commentary_type value="genomic">1</Gene-commentary_type>
```

is selected with an "at" sign before the attribute name:

```
  -if Gene-commentary_type@value -equals genomic \
  -tab \\
  -element Gene-commentary_accession | 
  sort | uniq 
```

This prints every genomic accession regardless of nesting depth:

```
  NC_001666
  x86563
  Z11973
```

**Heterogeneous Objects**

The **nquire** program uses command-line arguments to request data from external CGI services. A query on curated biological database associations:

```
  nquire -get http://mygene.info/v3/gene/2652 | 
  xtract -j2x -set - -rec GeneRec |
```

returns data containing a heterogeneous mixture of objects in the pathway section:

```
<pathway>
  <reactome>
    <id>R-HSA-162582</id>
    <name>Signal Transduction</name>
  </reactome>
  ... 
  <wikipathways>
    <id>WP453</id>
    <name>GPCRs, Class A Rhodopsin-like</name>
  </wikipathways>
</pathway>
```

The **parent-slash-star** construct is used to visit the individual components of a parent object without needing to explicitly specify their names. For printing, the name of a child object is indicated by a question mark:

```
xtract -pattern GeneRec -group "pathway/*" \ 
-pfc \\
-element "?,name,id"
```
This displays a table of pathway database references:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>ID</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reactome</td>
<td>Signal Transduction</td>
<td>R-HSA-162582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reactome</td>
<td>Disease</td>
<td>R-HSA-1643685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reactome</td>
<td>Diseases of signal transduction</td>
<td>R-HSA-5663202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wikipathways</td>
<td>GPCRs, Class A Rhodopsin-like</td>
<td>WP455</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indexed Fields

Entrez can report the fields and links that are indexed for each database. For example:

```
einfo -db protein -fields
```

will return a table of field abbreviations and names indexed for proteins:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACQN</td>
<td>Accession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL</td>
<td>All Fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASM</td>
<td>Assembly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUTH</td>
<td>Author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRD</td>
<td>Breed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CULT</td>
<td>Cultivar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIV</td>
<td>Division</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECNO</td>
<td>EC/RN Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FILT</td>
<td>Filter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FKEY</td>
<td>Feature key</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GENE</td>
<td>Gene Name</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Local PubMed Cache

Fetching data from Entrez works well when a few thousand records are needed, but it does not scale for much larger sets of data, where the time it takes to download becomes a limiting factor. EDirect can now preload all 30 million PubMed records onto an inexpensive external 500 GB solid state drive. For example, PMID 12345678 would be stored (as a compressed XML file) at:

```
/Archive/12/34/56/12345678.xml.gz
```

using a hierarchy of folders to organize the data for rapid retrieval of any record.

Set an environment variable in your .bash_profile configuration file to reference your external drive:

```
export EDIRECT_PUBMED_MASTER=/Volumes/external_disk_name_goes_here
```

and run:

```
archive-pubmed
```

to download the PubMed release files and distribute each record for random access. This process will take several hours to complete, but subsequent updates are incremental, and should finish in minutes.

The local archive is a completely self-contained, turnkey system, with no need for the user to download and configure complicated third-party database software.

Retrieving a PubmedArticleSet containing almost 120,000 PubMed records from the local archive:

```
esearch -db pubmed -query "PNAS [JOUR]" -pub abstract | 
  efetch -format uid | stream-pubmed | gunzip -c |
```

takes about 15 seconds. Retrieving those records from NCBI's network service, with efetch -format xml, would take around 40 minutes.

Even moderately large sets of PubMed query results can benefit from using the local cache. A reverse citation lookup on 191 papers:
entrez direct reference

requires 5 seconds to match 7134 subsequent articles. Fetching them from the local archive:

esearch -db pubmed -query "Cozzarelli NR [AUTH]" | elink -cited |

efetch -format uid | fetch-pubmed |

is practically instantaneous. Printing the names of all authors in those records:

xtract -pattern PubmedArticle -block Author \
   -sep "" -tab "\\n" -element LastName,Initials |

allows creation of a frequency table:

sort-uniq-count-rank

that lists the authors who most often cited the original papers:

    112  Cozzarelli NR
    73   Maxwell A
    56   Wang JC
    49   Osheroff N
    48   Stasiak A
...

Using the network service would extend the 7 second running time by 2 minutes.

**Local Search Index**

A similar divide-and-conquer strategy is used to create a local information retrieval system suitable for large data mining queries. Run:

index-pubmed

to populate retrieval index files from records stored in the local archive. This will also take a few hours.

For PubMed titles and primary abstracts, the indexing process deletes hyphens after specific prefixes, removes accents and diacritical marks, splits words at punctuation characters, corrects encoding artifacts, and spells out Greek letters for easier searching on scientific terms. It then prepares inverted indices with term positions, and uses them to build distributed term lists and postings files.

For example, the term list that includes "cancer" would be located at:

/Postings/NORM/c/a/n/c/canc.trm

A query on cancer thus only needs to load a very small subset of the total index. This design allows efficient expression evaluation, unrestricted wildcard truncation, phrase queries, and proximity searches.

The **phrase-search** script provides access to the local search system. The full set of indexed terms, without record counts, can be printed for any field:

phrase-search -terms NORM

In local queries, a trailing asterisk is used to indicate term truncation:

phrase-search -count "catabolite repress*"

Using -counts returns expanded terms and individual postings counts:

phrase-search -counts "catabolite repress*"

Query evaluation includes Boolean operations and parenthetical expressions:
phrase-search -query "(literacy AND numeracy) NOT (adolescent OR child)"

Adjacent words in the query are treated as a contiguous phrase:

phrase-search -query "selective serotonin reuptake inhibit*"

More inclusive searches can use the Porter2 stemming algorithm:

phrase-search -query "monoamine oxidase inhibitor [STEM]"

Each plus sign will replace a single word inside a phrase:

phrase-search -query "vitamin c + + common cold"

Runs of tildes indicate the maximum distance between phrases:

phrase-search -query "vitamin c ~ ~ common cold"

MeSH hierarchy code and year of publication are also indexed:


An exact match can search for all or part of a title or abstract:

phrase-search -exact "Genetic Control of Biochemical Reactions in Neurospora."

All query commands return a list of PMIDs, which can be piped directly to fetch-pubmed to retrieve the records. For example:

```
phrase-search -query "selective serotonin ~ ~ reuptake inhibitor*" | fetch-pubmed | xtract -pattern PubmedArticle -num Author | sort-uniq-count -n | reorder-columns 2 1 | head -n 25 | tee /dev/tty | xy-plot auth.png
```

performs a proximity search with dynamic wildcard expansion (matching phrases like "selective serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors") and fetches 12,038 PubMed records from the local archive. It then counts the number of authors for each paper, printing a frequency table of the number of papers per number of coauthors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Authors</th>
<th>Number of Papers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and creating a visual graph of the data. The entire set of commands runs in under 4 seconds.

The phrase-search and fetch-pubmed scripts are front-ends to the rchive program, which is used to build and search the inverted retrieval system. Rchive is multi-threaded for speed, and can match several PubMed titles per second, fetching the positional indices for all terms in parallel before evaluating the title words as a contiguous phrase.

**Rapidly Scanning all of PubMed**
If the expand-current script is run after index-pubmed, an ad hoc scan can be performed on the entire set of live PubMed records:

```bash
cat $EDIRECT_PUBMED_MASTER/Current/*.xml |
xtract -timer -pattern PubmedArticle \ 
  -if "#Author" eq 7 \ 
  -element MedlineCitation/PMID LastName
```

in this case finding articles with seven authors. (Author count is not indexed by Entrez or locally by EDirect.)

Xtract uses the Boyer-Moore-Horspool algorithm to partition an XML stream into individual records, sending them down a thread-safe communication channel to be distributed among multiple instances of the data exploration and extraction function. On a modern six-core computer, it can process the full scan of all 30 million PubMed records in just under 4 minutes, a sustained rate of over 125,000 records per second.

**Identifier Conversion**

The index-pubmed script also downloads MeSH descriptor information from NLM and creates a conversion file:

```xml
... <Rec> 
  <Code>D064007</Code> 
  <Name>Ataxia Telangiectasia Mutated Proteins</Name> 
  <Tree>D08.811.913.696.620.682.700.097</Tree> 
  <Tree>D12.776.157.687.125</Tree> 
  <Tree>D12.776.660.720.125</Tree> 
</Rec> ... 
```

that can be used for mapping MeSH codes to and from chemical or disease names. For example:

```bash
cat $EDIRECT_PUBMED_MASTER/Data/meshconv.xml |
xtract -pattern Rec \ 
  -if Name -starts-with "ataxia telangiectasia" \ 
  -element Code
```

will return:

```
C565779
C576887
D001260
D064007
```

The meshconv.xml file is prepared by use of the `xtract -wrp` command:

```bash
cat desc2020.xml |
xtract -wrp Set,Rec -pattern DescriptorRecord \ 
  -wrp Set,Rec -pattern DescriptorRecord/DescriptorUI \ 
  -wrp Name -first DescriptorName/String \ 
  -wrp Tree -element TreeNumberList/TreeNumber | 
xtract -format | 
xtract -wrp Set -pattern Rec -sort Code
```

which wraps element contents in new XML tags by issuing several other formatting commands:

```
-pfx "<Tree>" -sep "</Tree>" -sfx "</Tree>"
```

**Natural Language Processing Resources**

Additional annotation on PubMed can be downloaded and indexed by running:

```
index-extras
```

NCBI's Biomedical Text Mining Group performs computational analysis of PubMed and PMC papers, and extracts chemical, disease, and gene references from the article contents (see PMID 31114887). Along with
NLM Gene Reference Into Function mappings (see PMID 14728215), these terms are indexed in CHEM, DISZ, and GENE fields.

Recent research at Stanford defined biological themes, supported by dependency paths, which are indexed as THME and PATH fields. Theme keys are taken from a table in the paper (see PMID 29490008):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Acronym</th>
<th>Theme Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>Agonism, activation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>Antagonism, blocking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Binding, ligand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Inhibits cell growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Drug targets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Affects expression/production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E+</td>
<td>Increases expression/production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-</td>
<td>Decreases expression/production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Promotes progression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Same protein or complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Signaling pathway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Role in disease pathogenesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Metabolism, pharmacokinetics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Improper regulation linked to disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Biomarkers (diagnostic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M+</td>
<td>Biomarkers (progression)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Inhibits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Transport, channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pa</td>
<td>Alleviates, reduces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pr</td>
<td>Prevents, suppresses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>Production by cell population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>Regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sa</td>
<td>Side effect/adverse event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Treatment/therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Te</td>
<td>Possible therapeutic effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td>Causal mutations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ud</td>
<td>Mutations affecting disease course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V+</td>
<td>Alleviates, reduces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Activates, stimulates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>Enhances response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Overexpression in disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Polymorphisms alter risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>Enzyme activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Themes common to multiple chemical-disease-gene relationships are disambiguated so they can be queried individually. The expanded list, along with MeSH category codes and examples of query automation, can be seen with:

```
phrase-search -help
```

### Integration with Entrez

The phrase-search -filter command allows PMIDs to be generated by an EDirect search and then incorporated as a component in a local query:

```
esearch -db pubmed -query "complement system proteins [MESH]" |
efetch -format uid |
phrase-search -filter "L [THME] AND D10* [TREE]"
```

This finds PubMed papers about complement proteins and limits them by the "improper regulation linked to disease" theme and the lipids MeSH chemical category:

7683550
19235040
20587159
22368276
24431228
26151457

Intermediate lists of PMIDs can be saved to a file and piped (with "cat") into a subsequent phrase-search -filter query, or uploaded to the Entrez history server by piping to:

```
epost -db pubmed -format uid
```

### Exploration of External Services

The experimental `xplore` script expands the EDirect paradigm to navigate connections in the biological resources of the BioThings.io data integration project at Scripps Research (see PMID 23175613). A drug repurposing example (see PMID 29390967):

```
xplore -load hgvs "chr6:g.26093141G>A,chr12:g.111351981C>T" |
xplore -link ncbigene |
xplore -link wikipathways |
xplore -link ncbigene |
xplore -link uniprot |
xplore -link inchikey |
xplore -save uid
```
runs in 18 seconds and returns 1030 chemicals that might act on gene products in pathways associated with two diseases, and would thus be potential candidates for treating hereditary hemochromatosis or hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. There is initial support in xplore -search for -organism and -action shortcuts, similar to what is available in efilter.

As part of this development, xtract gained a -path exploration command and support for multi-level object addresses, delimited by periods or slashes:

```
xtract -path pathway.wikipathways.id -tab "\n" -element id
```

### Conversion of JSON to XML

Consolidated gene information retrieved in JSON format:

```
nquire -get http://mygene.info/v3 gene 3043 |
```

contains a multi-dimensional JSON array of exon coordinates:

```json
"position": [
  [5225463, 5225726],
  [5226576, 5226799],
  [5226929, 5227071]
],
```

This can be converted to XML with xtract -j2x:

```
xtract -j2x -set -rec GeneRec -nest plural |
```

using "-nest plural" to derive a parent name that keeps the internal structure intact in XML:

```
<positions>
  <position>5225463</position>
  <position>5225726</position>
  ...
</positions>
```

Individual exons can then be visited by piping the record through:

```
xtract -pattern GeneRec -group exons \
  -block positions -pfc "\n" -element position
```

```none
5225463 5225726
5226576 5226799
5226929 5227071
```

### Conversion of Tables to XML

Tab-delimited data is easily converted to XML with xtract -t2x:

```
gunzip -c | grep -v NEWENTRY | cut -f 2,3 | 
xtract -t2x -set Set -rec Rec -skip 1 Code Name
```
This takes a series of command-line arguments with tag names for wrapping the individual columns, and skips the first line of input, which contains header information, to generate a new XML file:

```xml
<Set>
  <Rec>
    <Code>1246500</Code>
    <Name>repA1</Name>
  </Rec>
  <Rec>
    <Code>1246501</Code>
    <Name>repA2</Name>
  </Rec>
  ...
</Set>
```

## XML Namespaces and Encoded Data

Namespace prefixes are indicated by a colon, and a leading colon matches any prefix:

```bash
nquire -url "http://webservice.wikipathways.org" getPathway -pwId WP455 | xtract -pattern "ns1:getPathwayResponse" -element ":gpml" |
```

The `transmute` program can convert Base64-encoded data back to its original binary form:

```bash
transmute -decode64
```

## Installation

EDirect consists of a set of scripts and programs that are downloaded to the user's computer.

EDirect will run on Unix and Macintosh computers that have the Perl language installed, and under the Cygwin Unix-emulation environment on Windows PCs.

To install the EDirect software, open a terminal window and execute one of the following two commands:

```bash
```

or follow the detailed installation instructions in the EDirect web documentation.

This downloads several scripts into an "edirect" folder in the user's home directory. It then fetches any missing Perl modules, and installs platform-specific precompiled executables for xtract and rchive.

At the end of this process, the script will ask for permission to add EDirect to your PATH permanently by editing your configuration file. If you answer "y" it will add:

```bash
export PATH=${PATH}:${HOME}/edirect
```

to the end of your .bash_profile file. If you answer "n", you should then manually edit .bash_profile to add the edirect folder as one of the components of your existing PATH assignment statement.

## Documentation

Documentation for EDirect is on the web at:


EDirect navigation functions call the URL-based Entrez Programming Utilities:


NCBI database resources are described by:


Information on how to obtain an API Key is described in this NCBI blogpost: