
Supporting Excel

We present another collection of tips and tricks for helping your users get the most from Excel.

By Dennis Jarrett

Multiple Entry

To get the same formula or value into a range of cells, select the range first (it can be contiguous or non-contiguous) and then type the entry. Don't press Enter immediately - use Ctrl-Enter instead.

Copying Validation Rules

When a cell has validation rules set (using Data/Validation) to limit the data that is acceptable, those rules will be copied or moved if you copy or move the cell. But you can also take a copy of the validation rules without the data - select the cell and press Ctrl-C or use Edit/Copy. Go to the destination cell and use Edit/Paste Special (or right-click on the target cell). A dialog box pops up on which you can tick the Validation option. This copies the rules without any data. See Figure 1.

Quick Range Info

If you highlight a range of cells containing values, by default you'll see the sum of the range displayed on the status bar below the worksheet window (if it's not there, turn it on by using View/Status Bar). Right-click the status bar and you'll see that you can have other quick calculations shown there - maximum and minimum values, averages, and counts (select Count Nums for a count of the cells that contain numbers or Count to simply count the number of filled cells).

Sort By Row Contents

The Data/Sort procedure normally sorts by columns. But you can also sort a selection on the basis of the contents in individual rows. The results arrange the cells in each row in sequence. Select some data spanning multiple columns, go to Data/Sort, click Options, and choose Sort Left To Right. See Figures 2 and 3 for an illustration.

Converting Drag-and-drop Data

If you hold down the right mouse button while dragging cell data from one area to another, Excel will display a few conversion options when you drop the data. They include the useful options to "Copy Here As Formats Only" and "Copy Here As Values Only".

Clearing A Cell

When you delete a cell, both the cell and its contents disappear from the worksheet and the other cells shift to fill the gap. Right-click on the cells to delete, then select Delete from the pop-up menu. Clearing a cell isn't the same thing at all. When you clear a cell, the cell remains in the worksheet - only its contents are removed. And don't clear a cell by selecting its contents and hitting the Spacebar: that just replaces them with a space character. Use the Delete and Backspace keys, or right-click on the cell and select Clear Contents.

Select The Work In Progress

Ctrl-A selects every cell in the worksheet. But you might not want that. You can select the entire range of cells you're working on by pressing Ctrl-Shift-* and the selection won't include empty cells around the immediate work in progress.

Automatically Move To The Next Data Entry Column

Excel moves to the next cell down when you press Enter (or the next cell in a different direction, if you've used Tools/Options/Edit to change the default). But if you have a range of cells in which to enter data, you can organise things so that Enter will take you to the top of the next column when the previous one is completed. Simply select the whole range before you start keying data. Press Enter when the first cell is

complete and you'll move to the next one; and when that's the last cell in a column, the next one will be at the top of the next column.

Changing SUM Ranges

The SUM function will total the values in a specified range, but you do normally have to use explicit arguments - a label or a cell reference. The only way then to change the range being summed is to change one of the arguments. But you can use the CHOOSE function to build a neat workaround. Figure 4 illustrates the method. In cells B4 to B7 we have a series of values, and B2 totals some or all of them - summing values between B4 and whichever one is identified by the CHOOSE selection based on B9. Enter a number between 1 and 4 into B9 and the SUM will take that to be the first, second, third or fourth entry in the list. In the example, the highlighted entry "2" translates into the second item - so the sum is B4+B5, or 10+20.

Group Text Boxes With Charts

If you use a text box to add a label to a chart, the text box won't move along with the chart when you try to reposition things. Grouping solves the problem - click on the chart and then the text box while holding down Shift, go to the Drawings toolbar (open it if necessary via Tools/Toolbars/Drawing), and click on the Group button.

Add Texture

It can be quite effective to put some texture on pie slices, chart bars and other chart objects. Right-click on the object, select Format Data Series/Patterns/Fill Effects/Texture, and make your selection. The same approach can put graduated colour on to chart objects - Format Data Series/Patterns/Fill Effects/Gradient - and you can apply either to the chart background by right-clicking on it and selecting Format Plot Area.

Display Comments

Comments are a neat tool - not only for explaining the contents of a particular cell, but also for giving instructions to users. To view the comment (which you create using Insert/Comment) you normally have to hover the mouse pointer over the triangle on the corner of a commented cell. Excel can however be configured to display comments as a matter of course - go to Tools/Options/View and select Comment & Indicator. If a comment obscures a cell you need to see, it can be dragged away into a new position and it will still point to the commented cell.



Figure 1.

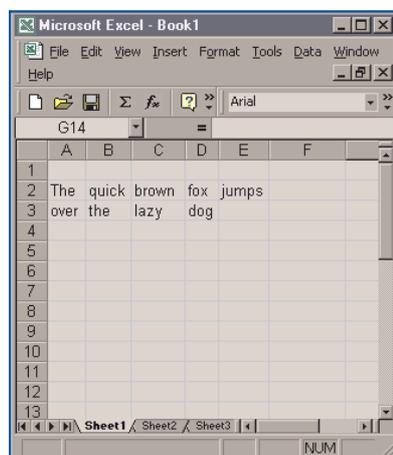


Figure 2.

Workspace Simplicity

Excel's saved workspace facility lets you save and open a whole group of workbooks in one operation. Open all the Excel files you want to be included in the group; then use File/Save Workspace and give the group a name. Excel will create an XLW workspace file with that name you specified. To open all the files in one go, use File/Open and select the XLW file.

Inserting Identical Sheets

If you need an additional worksheet with contents or formatting that are identical to an existing sheet, you can do it manually - Insert/Worksheet, take a copy of the data, paste it on the new sheet. The quicker alternative is to click on the tab for the sheet you want to copy; hold down Ctrl and drag the tab into place in the sheet sequence. A triangle pointer appears directly above the sheet tabs to indicate the position of the new sheet; your mouse pointer will display a page with a plus sign to indicate that it's copying rather than moving the sheet. Release the mouse button to drop the sheet in at the triangle position. Change the sheet name and clear any data you don't want.

Safer Debugging

Locating problems in complex formulas isn't always easy, and during a debug there's a good chance you will lose the original formula. If there's any danger of this, copy the formula into an adjacent cell and remove the equals sign so that it sits there as a text string. Then you can debug the original, reverting when necessary by copying the copied formula back.

Find That File

A quick snapshot of a file can sometimes help you identify it more easily than the name assigned. Before you save a workbook, use File/Properties and click on the

Save Preview Picture checkbox. Thereafter you can use preview mode when you're searching for a particular workbook using File/Open - click on the down arrow beside the Views icon (second from the right at the top of the dialog box) and select Previews. When you click on workbooks that have saved previews associated with them, you'll see the snapshot in the right-hand pane.

Zoom Specific

The Zoom control (View/Zoom) lets you enlarge or reduce the size of the worksheet by a specified percentage. Choose the Fit Selection option with a range of cells selected, however, and you will zoom in on those cells alone - with as much enlargement as possible, up to the maximum of 400%. Press Ctrl-Z to return to 100%.

Cross-check

The IF function makes a useful way to cross-check totals and calculations. For instance, you might want to double-check the grand total of a cross-summed worksheet and display an error message if the vertical and horizontal sums don't add up. In Figure 5, the formula in E6 compares the results of summing the row against the total for the horizontal and allows the result only if they are the same.

Colour-coding Cells

A useful crosschecking trick uses conditional formatting - you can colour-code cells so that the background, font, or other attributes change when the values are out of expected ranges. The change in appearance is easy to spot.

With the cell selected, go to Format/Conditional Formatting and enter the conditions to test. You can apply tests to data or formulas in the cell, and you can set up to three rules for any one cell; the Format button lets you set the effects if the conditions are met, and the results are previewed in the same dialog box. Figure 6 shows a crosschecking test for E6, and Figure 7 shows what happens if the crosscheck fails.

Centre Text Across Excel Columns

The usual way to produce a neat head for multiple rows or columns is to merge cells and centre the heading text within the merged cell. But this can cause problems, for you can't copy or cut rows or columns that intersect with merged cells. There is a workaround, though it applies only to column headings. Enter the text in the leftmost column of the range, select that cell and extend it over the remaining columns, then go to Format/Cells/Alignment and choose Center Across Selection from the Horizontal dropdown list.

Align Objects

Aligning objects like text boxes and autoshapes can be tricky. But hold down the Alt key when dragging a chart or graphic, and the object's frame will snap to a cell boundaries.

Shrink And Fit

Most spreadsheet users spend too much time juggling column widths to improve the sheet's appearance or persuade it to fit on to a particular piece of paper. Subsequent changes to data can undo all the good work. Much better to Shrink To Fit, which reduces the cells' contents to whatever size is necessary to display everything in the cell. Select a range of cells, use Format/Cells/Alignment, and click the Shrink To Fit checkbox. Be warned, though - this isn't available if you are using Justify or Fill alignment, or if you have Wrap Text selected.

Change The Width Of Multiple Columns

To alter the width of multiple columns, select them (you could use Ctrl-A to select the whole sheet) and put the mouse pointer on the divider between any two column headings in the range. When it changes to the resizing tool, click and drag; when you release the mouse button, all the selected columns will be resized. The same technique works for row heights too.

Shading Alternating Rows

It's easy enough to give a worksheet the extra legibility conveyed by alternately shaded rows. Highlight the first row on the sheet, right-click and select Format Cells. Go to Patterns and pick a colour - light green, light grey or light blue are good. Now select the coloured row and the one immediately below it, and click the Format

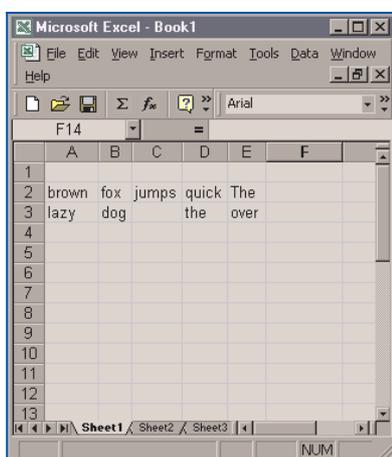


Figure 3.

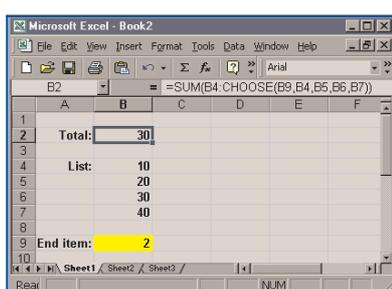


Figure 4.

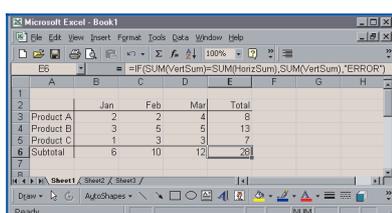


Figure 5.

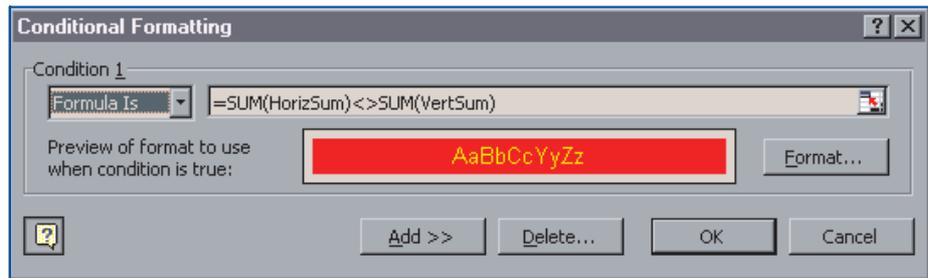


Figure 6.

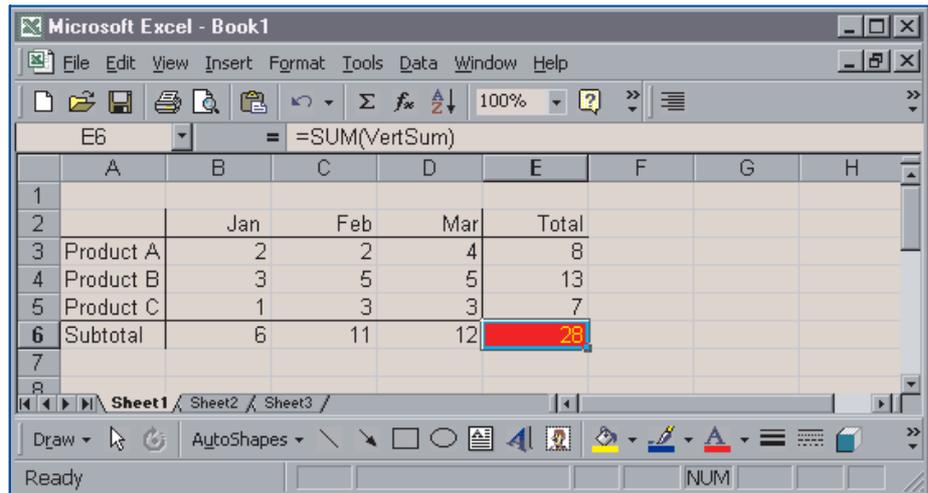


Figure 7.

Painter button on the Standard toolbar. Drag your mouse down to highlight as many rows as your require, and the two-row coloured/uncoloured pattern will be copied to them.

Link A Text Box To A Cell

It's possible to link a text box to a specific cell in the worksheet. Create your text box by using the relevant tool from the Drawing toolbar. Click inside the text box, then go up to the Formula bar and type an equals sign. Now click on the worksheet cell that contains the data or text you want to appear your text box. Press Enter, and the text box should now have those contents. Change the cell, and the text box should change too.

You can't type the cell reference in the text box directly, you can't use formulas, and while you can type the cell reference you'd better be sure to preface it by the sheet name followed by an exclamation mark.

Changing Default Formats

The percent sign on the Formatting toolbar offers a quick way to apply a percentage format to the selected cells. But by default it displays no decimal places. You can alter this, because that button is just a shortcut to a specific Excel style. Go to Format/Style and select Percent. You'll see a dialog box with several selectable characteristics. Click on Modify and you'll be able to change the formatting - including the number of decimal places used by default. You can change the styles associated with the comma and currency buttons in the same way.

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