Excel: Tips to Fix Common Annoyances
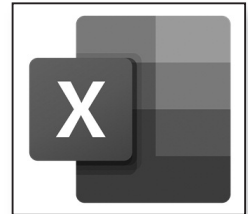
Cure Excel's Most Infuriating Habits – and Pick Up Handy Spreadsheet Tips!

This article shows you how to:
- Work around Excel's most irritating behaviour
- Discover how to do things you didn't know were possible
- Create and use spreadsheets more quickly and easily

Like all the other programs in Microsoft Office, Microsoft Excel is useful and powerful, but it also has all sorts of ways to bamboozle you! In this article I'll give you solutions to Excel's most irritating quirks and oddities. I'll also give you handy tips to help you use Excel like a pro!

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View Two Worksheets at the Same Time

Refer to one sheet when typing into another

Since a spreadsheet file can contain any number of worksheets, it's perfectly reasonable to want to refer to one while working on another. Perhaps you want to copy figures from the first sheet to the second, or perhaps you just want to make sure the two sheets have a similar style and layout.

Tell Excel to show both at once!

You could switch back and forth between them by clicking the tabs at the bottom of the window, but if you have to do this for long it soon gets tiresome! Here's a better way: display the two sheets one above the other so that you can see both at the same time.
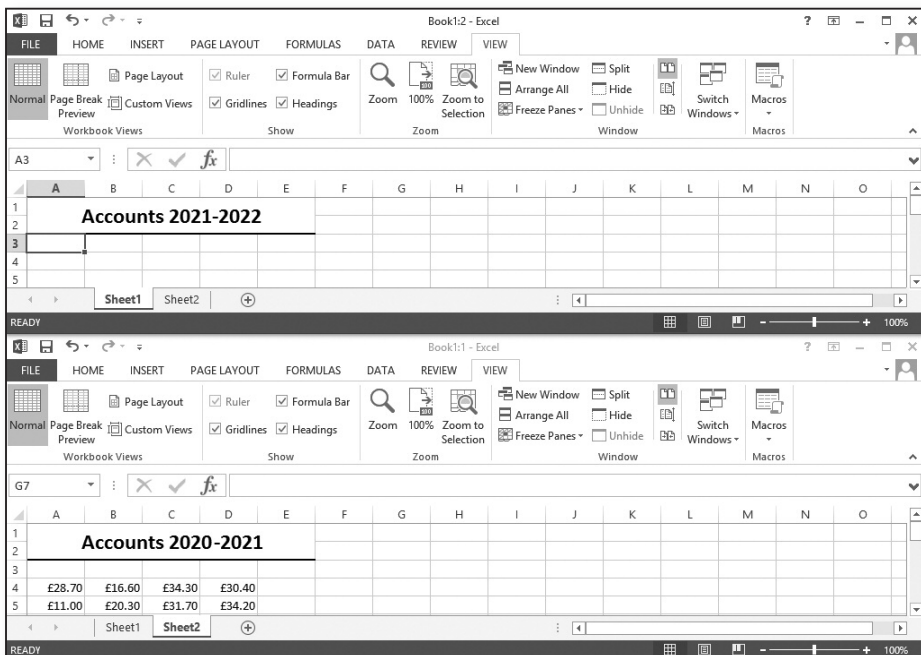
With the required spreadsheet open in Microsoft Excel (and either of those tabs selected), here's what to do:

1. Switch to the **View** tab ① on the Ribbon and click the **New Window** button ②.

2. In Excel 2013 and later, another Excel window will open looking exactly like the first and sitting in front of it. Switch to the **View** tab of the Ribbon in this window. (Alternatively you could switch back to the first window, which is still displaying the **View** tab, since it doesn't matter which window you use to carry out the next couple of steps.)

   In Excel 2010, you won't notice anything happen at all, but don't worry about that and carry on.

3. Now click the **View Side by Side** button ③.

4. Your two windows are now arranged one above the other. At the moment both windows are showing the same worksheet, so – in either window – switch to the other sheet you want to see by clicking its tab.

   Select the two sheets you want to see

5. You'll notice that an option named 'Synchronous Scrolling' has been switched on too: if you scroll up or down in one window, the other will scroll in the same direction by the same amount. You probably don't want that happening, so click the **Synchronous Scrolling** button ④ to switch it off.

   Make the two windows scroll independently
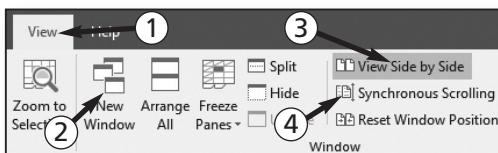
Now you can get on and do whatever you needed, referring to one of the sheets while typing into the other. In fact, you can type into any sheet in either window: you're not limited to doing your editing in just one of these windows. When you press **Ctrl+S** to save your changes, you're saving the changes made to this file in either window.

Two views, but still just one file open

If you'd prefer to have two the windows side-by side rather than one above the other, you can. Just click the **Arrange All** button and choose **Vertical** followed by **OK** in the little dialog that opens.

Close either window when finished

When you've finished using two windows and want to go back to just one again, simply close either of those windows. The remaining window will switch back to its usual size and position.

Speed Up Your Work by Naming Important Cells

Difficulty finding and remembering cell references?

When you're writing formulas to add totals and so on, you can spend quite a time scrolling around to find the cell references you need. For instance, perhaps you need to add the figures at the bottom of your first three columns, so you have to scroll down, determine that they're (say) A32, B19 and C26, then remember those references as you type your formula:

=A32+B19+C26

Even worse, perhaps you're totting-up figures from different worksheets, so that as well as finding those references you've got some unwieldy typing to contend with:

=Sheet1!A32+Sheet2!B19+Sheet3!C26

Wouldn't you prefer to type something like this instead?

**=TotalApril+TotalMay+TotalJune**

Gives names to important cells!

It's absurdly easy to do, and it brings all sorts of benefits. When you're writing formulas, it obviously means you'll be dealing with meaningful and memorable names, so you'll spend far less time looking up cell references. And when you refer to an old spreadsheet (or send one to someone else), those

names will make it a lot easier to understand what's going on in your formulas.

Naming a cell is a simple two-step job:

1. Click the cell you want to name ①.

2. Click in the 'Name Box' at the far left of the formula bar, which currently shows that cell's reference ② and in its place type whatever name you choose for the cell ③. Press **Enter** to confirm it and you've finished.
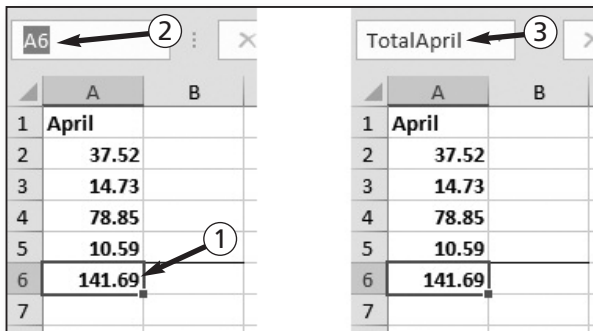
There are a few rules about what names you can choose, but they're fairly straightforward. A name must start with a letter or an underscore character (_), not a number, and it mustn't contain spaces. You can use a mix of capital and small letters, but Excel doesn't take any notice of the difference, so if you name a cell **TotalApril** but refer to it as **totalapril** in a formula, that won't cause a problem.

Excel Isn't Updating My Totals!

For most of us, an important benefit of using a spread-sheet is the way it automatically updates our totals whenever we add or change figures. For example,

Formulas should update automatically

taking the figures in the screenshot on the previous page, if I added 1 to the number in cell A4, I'd expect the total in cell A6 to increase by 1 automatically.

Surprisingly, this is optional

Surprisingly, though, Excel doesn't have to work that way. If you'd prefer that Excel didn't update your formulas whenever figures changed, you can tell it not to. In that case, it would update them only when you opened a spreadsheet file, to make sure everything is shown correctly when you first see the figures.

Excel may switch this off itself

You probably wouldn't do this on purpose, and it's not easy to do it by accident, but it can happen of its own accord, and it's one of Excel's worst annoyances. All it takes is for you to make a mistake severe enough that Excel doesn't know how to deal with your formulas, and you can find that it simply stops dealing with them!

Force recalculation by pressing F9

If you suspect this is what has happened, a good first step is to change a figure somewhere which you'd expect to cause a formula-cell to update. If it doesn't update, press the **F9** key, which tells Excel to recalculate all the formulas in the sheet.

Switch on automatic recalculation

Assuming that works, and that formula-cell now shows the figure it should, follow the steps below to switch automatic calculation back on.

If it didn't work, and you instead saw an error message, you'll first need to find and fix whatever problem there is with your formulas that's preventing Excel from recalculating them successfully.

If all else fails, try an elimination process of deleting one formula-cell and pressing **F9** to see if that was the formula causing the problem. If it wasn't, press **Ctrl+Z** to reinstate that formula and repeat the process with another.

1. Click the **File** tab at the far-left of the Ribbon and choose **Options**.

2. At the left of the Options window, click on **Formulas** ①.

3. On the right, below the words **Workbook Calculation**, you'll probably find that the 'Manual' option has been selected: in other words, Excel has indeed stopped recalculating your formulas automatically and will only do it when you press the **F9** key. Click the **Automatic** option to select it ②.

Choose the Automatic option

4. Click the **OK** button at the bottom of the window to close it and return to your spreadsheet.
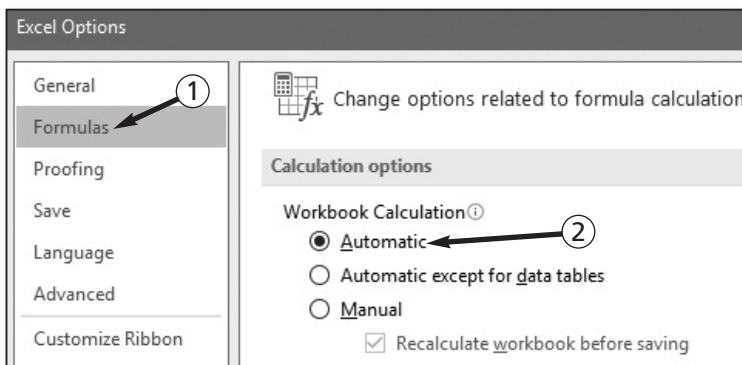
Avoid Losing Zeros at the Beginning or End of Figures

A common frustration for spreadsheet newcomers is Excel's apparent dislike of zeros:

Leading and trailing zeros disappear

• You type a telephone dialling code (such as '01234') into a cell, and the moment you leave that cell it loses its leading zero ('1234').

• You type a decimal number into a cell (such as '22.50'), and Excel promptly removes that trailing zero ('22.5').

There's a good reason for this, and it's the same in both cases. As far as Excel is concerned, the zeros are unnecessary. However, the solutions are different.

Leading zeros

Leading zero is irrelevant in a number

In the first case, Excel doesn't know you intended to type a dialling code. It looks like a number (1234), so Excel treats it that way and strips out the irrelevant zero.

Tell Excel it's text, not a number!

One solution is to type an apostrophe immediately before the number (**'01234**). This tells Excel to treat what you've typed as text, not as a number. When you leave the cell, the apostrophe will be removed but the number itself won't be changed.

Alternatively, if you need to type a row or column of similar items, select that row or column and choose **Text** from the drop-down list in the 'Number' group on the Ribbon.

This leads to another little annoyance: if a cell contains a number but it's being treated as text, that cell gains a little green triangle as a warning. It's simplest

to ignore these triangles, but if they offend you, it's possible to get rid of them. Go to **File** > **Options**, choose **Formulas** at the left of the Options window and then, in the 'Error checking rules' section, remove the tick beside **Numbers formatted as text or preceded by an apostrophe**. Click **OK** and those green triangles will disappear.
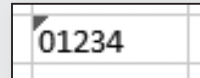
Trailing zeros

You want numbers shown with two decimal places

In the second case, you probably intended the figure to represent currency (£22.50), so you need to keep that final zero for clarity, or perhaps you want Excel to show all the figures in this column to two decimal places so

that the decimal points all line up and the figures are easier to read.

If you intended the cell to represent currency, select the cell (or the entire column or row), open the drop-down list in the 'Number' group on the Ribbon and choose either **Currency** or **Accounting**. (The two are almost identical, but 'Accounting' places the £ sign at the left of each cell whereas 'Currency' places it beside the figure.)

Format as Currency or Accounting…

If you want to show the figure to two (or more) decimal places, select the cell (or the entire row or column), choose **Number** ① from the drop-down list in the 'Number' group and then click the **Increase Decimal** button ② as often as needed to increase the number of decimal places.

*… or use the **Increase Decimal** option*
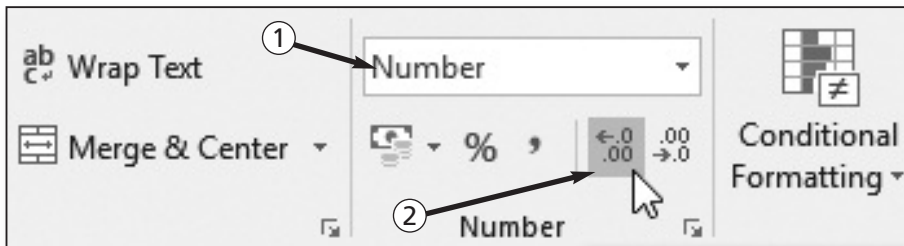
Type Two or More Lines of Text into a Cell

If you've ever tried to type more than a single line of text into a cell, you probably gave up, assuming it was impossible. The obvious thing to do is to press **Enter** at the end of the first line – but, of course, that just takes you to the cell below rather than starting a new line in the current cell.

*Pressing **Enter** won't start a new line*

The trick is to press **Alt+Enter** instead. By doing this, you can type as many lines of text into a single cell as you like.

*Instead, use **Alt+Enter***

The cell stays narrow but gets very tall!

There's a catch, though, as you'll discover when you do it. Initially everything seems fine: you type the first line, press **Alt+Enter** and type the second line, and it all looks as it should ①. However, when you press **Enter** or **Tab** to leave the cell, you'll find that Excel doesn't widen the column to fit those two lines of text – it just makes the row tall enough to contain all the characters ②.
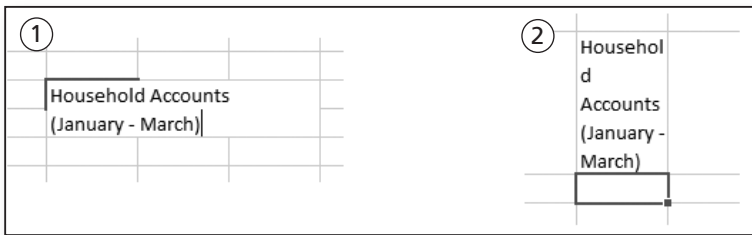

Make the column wider…

To make the text look presentable, you have to widen the column yourself. Move the mouse pointer up to the join between the current column and the column to its right ③, press-and-hold the left mouse button and drag to the right until the column is wide enough to display the text as you intended.
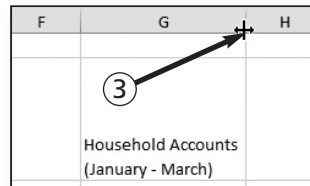
Even then, it probably doesn't look perfect. You'll usually find that the cell is still much taller than it needs to be, with your text at the bottom below an expanse of white space.

… and align the text to the top of the cell

To fix that, click your cell and then click the **Top Align** button ④ in the 'Alignment' group on the Ribbon's **Home** tab. As well as aligning your text to the top of the cell, it also removes the unnecessary white space in that cell, making it look the way you probably hoped it would from the start!
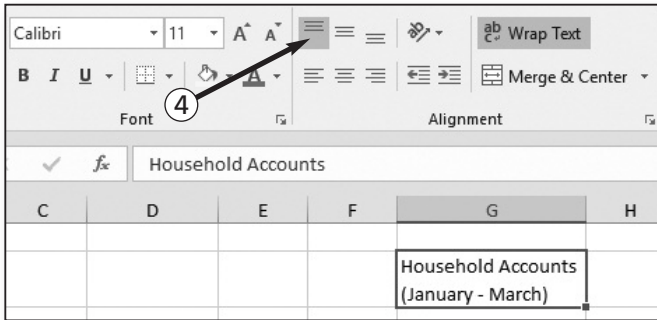
Combine Different Formatting in a Single Cell

You've typed a heading into a cell and you want to make it bold. Easy – just click that cell and press **Ctrl+B** (or click the 'B' button in the 'Font' group on the Ribbon). Ideally, though, you'd also like to make a couple of words italic. Surely Excel won't let you do that?

Make just a couple of words italic

Remarkably, it will. Just click the cell, so that its text appears in the formula bar, then select the characters you want to format and use the familiar options in the 'Font' group on the Ribbon.

Easy: select those words in the formula bar
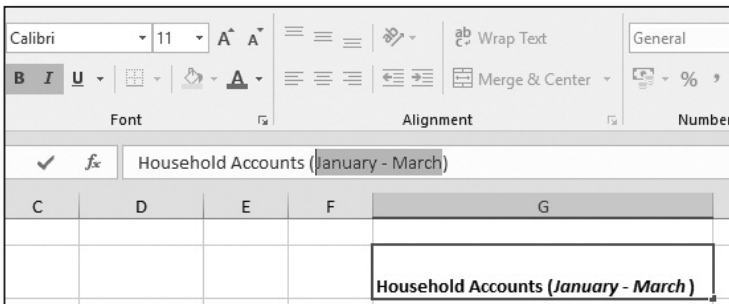
In this way, the text in a single cell can use any combination of fonts, sizes, styles and colours.

Prevent Your Spreadsheet Printing at a Tiny Size!

An almost-empty sheet with tiny figures?

One of the most common annoyances with Excel is the way spreadsheets are printed. Without warning, you can find that a particular worksheet is printed at a tiny size, with all your figures bunched into one corner of an otherwise empty page.

Why does it do that? Well, it's quite likely that somewhere on that worksheet (far to the right, and/or a long way down) there's a cell that Excel regards as non-empty: perhaps you did actually type something into it, but you might simply have left it empty but formatted it in some way. Whatever the reason, Excel assumes you want to include that cell in the printed copy, so it scales everything down to a size that will fit all your cells (including that one) on an A4 page.

Fix this by setting your 'print area'

You could go in search of that cell and try to delete whatever it contains, but there's a simpler way. You can set a 'print area' for the sheet so that anything outside that area will be ignored. Here's what to do:

1. Start by selecting the cells you do want included when you print the worksheet. Click in the top-left cell you've used and, keeping the mouse button pressed, drag diagonally downwards and to the right until you reach the last cell you've used, then release the mouse button.

2. Switch to the **Page Layout** tab on the Ribbon, click the **Print Area** button and choose **Set Print Area**.
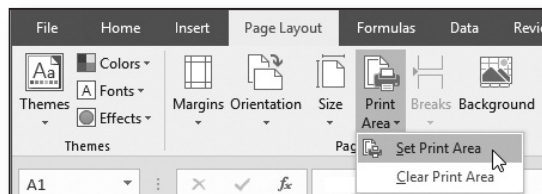
3. Now you're ready to print, safe in the knowledge that only the cells you've selected will be printed. Press **Ctrl+P** (or choose **File > Print**) and have a look at the preview of the printed page to make sure it looks as it should. If the preview suggests that your paper copy will still look rather cramped, there are several changes you can make to the print settings that could improve matters:

Check the print preview

- If the collection of cells you're printing is wider than it is tall (i.e. many columns, few rows), open the dropdown list that currently shows 'Portrait Orientation' and choose **Landscape Orientation** instead, to print the cells widthways on the paper.

Print sideways on the paper

- Try reducing the size of the margins of the page, providing a greater printing area. Open the drop-down list that currently shows 'Normal Margins' and choose **Narrow**, or choose **Custom Margins** and enter your own figures for the four margins in the Page Setup dialog that opens.

Reduce margin sizes

- Choose whether your cells should be printed on a single page or would be better spread over several pages. Open the drop-down list that currently shows 'No Scaling' and you'll find options to fit the whole print area onto a single page, fit all columns onto one page, or fit all rows onto one page.

Choose how to fit the cells on the paper

4. Finally, when you're happy with the way the preview looks, click the **Print** button at the top-left of the window to print the result on paper.

The 'print area' you set will be stored with your spreadsheet when you save it, so the same area of this sheet would be printed next time if you print it again. If you ever add more rows or columns to this sheet (and intend those to be printed), be sure to repeat the first two steps above to set the new print area before trying to print.

Better than a Calculator: Add Figures Fast!

Perhaps you're booking a holiday and you want to check the total cost of all the elements. You could use a calculator, but there's a better way – use Excel!

Enter your figures, select them…

Start Excel (and, in Excel 2013 or later, choose **Blank workbook** from the Start screen), then type your figures one after the other into a single column ① (pressing **Enter** after each figure to move to the cell below and type the next). When you've entered them all, select those cells (by pressing the left mouse button in the top cell and dragging down until you reach the last).

… and see the total automatically

Now look at the bottom of the window ② and you'll see that Excel tells you what you want to know. Along with 'Average' (the mean value you've typed) and 'Count' (the number of cells you've selected), it shows 'Sum', which contains the total of those cells added together.
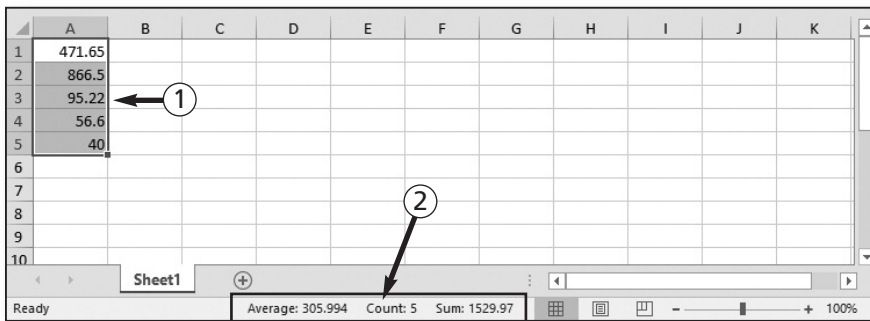
Benefits you don't get with a calculator

Using Excel to do this takes much the same time as it would take to use the Windows Calculator program to do it, but it gives you several advantages. First, it's easy to check that you've typed every figure correctly – so you know your total really is accurate – and that you haven't missed out a figure. Second, you can quickly remove a figure by holding **Ctrl** and clicking its cell to

see if you like the total better without it, or type a different figure into one of the cells and then reselect them all to see the new total.

And, of course, you're not really creating a spreadsheet as such, or even bothering with formulas. When you've received the answer you needed, you just close Excel and say **No** to the question of saving the file.

Just close Excel without saving

Speed Tip: Set Up Multiple Worksheets at Once

When you're creating a spreadsheet for accounting purposes, it's often going to consist of several sheets: perhaps one for each month of the year, or a sheet per quarter. You probably want those sheets to be laid out identically to one another, with the only difference being the figures you'll enter in the future.

Multiple sheets that should all look the same?

In other words, you'll probably want the same column headings on each sheet, formatted in the same way; you'll want to format certain columns as 'Currency', or 'Short Date' or 'Text' because that's what they'll eventually contain; you'll want to widen certain columns because they'll contain descriptions rather than numbers; you might even like to insert formulas lower down the sheet that will tot-up the figures you'll later be entering further up.

The trick in this situation is to plan ahead. You don't have to set up those sheets individually, and you can obviously save yourself a lot of time and frustration by doing all this work just once!
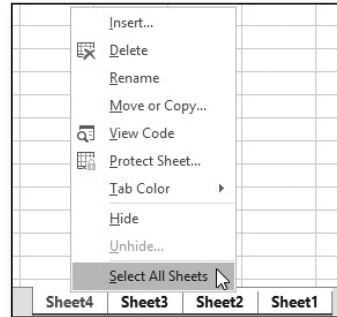
Starting by deciding how many sheets you'll need – 12 for a month-by-month spreadsheet, for example, or 4 for a quarterly one – and then create that number of sheets. You already have one sheet in Excel 2013 and

Set them all up at once!

later, or three in Excel 2010, so press **Shift+F11** as often as needed, adding one new sheet each time.

Select all your sheets

Next, right-click one of your tabs, it doesn't matter which, and choose **Select All Sheets** from the context menu. The tabs all turn white to indicate they're selected.

	Insert...
EX	Delete
	Rename
	Move or Copy...
qᴶ	View Code
	Protect Sheet...
	Tab Color ▶
	Hide
	Unhide...
	Select All Sheets ▷

| Sheet4 | Sheet3 | Sheet2 | Sheet1 |

Work on one and the rest will match

Now, on the sheet in front of you, start setting things up the way you want them, including everything that should appear on every sheet, and because every sheet is selected they really will all look the same.

If you want to check that this really is working, just click one of the other tabs to have a look. Just remember that doing this will deselect all the other sheets, so when you're ready to continue working on them all, you'll have to reselect them with a right-click > **Select All Sheets** first.

Easily Edit Cells Without Using the Formula Bar

When you click a cell and start typing, you always replace what was in that cell before. So how can you edit a cell – add something extra to it or correct a misspelling?

Edit inside the cell itself

You'd be forgiven for thinking you have to click the cell and then make any necessary changes in the formula bar. You can do it that way, but it's easier to do your editing in the cell itself, using either of these methods:

- Double-click the cell.

- Select the cell and then press the **F2** key.

The only difference between the two is that when you press F2 the text cursor always appears at the right of the cell's text, whereas when you double-click it appears roughly where the mouse pointer is.

You can then make any changes you need right in the cell itself, much as you edit text in any other program. Afterwards, press **Enter** or **Tab** or just click in a different cell.

The Arrow Keys Have Stopped Working

Here's a problem that's more-or-less unique to Excel, and it can be a real puzzle. You want to use the arrow keys to move the cell selector box around on your sheet, but they don't do that.

Instead, pressing an arrow key causes your worksheet to scroll in that direction. For example, pressing the down-arrow key in the expectation of selecting the cell below the current one just causes the sheet to scroll down by one line. What's happened?

The arrow keys just scroll the page

The answer is that you've accidentally pressed the **Scroll Lock** key. You'll find it towards the top-right of your keyboard, near the Print Screen and PauselBreak keys, and this is the effect it has in Excel. The solution, of course, is to press it again to switch it off.

*The **Scroll Lock** key is switched on*

Most programs take no notice at all of this key, but it behaves like Caps Lock: once switched on, it stays on until you toggle it off again. So you might well have caught the Scroll Lock key hours ago, but you wouldn't have noticed anything unusual until you started Excel and tried to use the arrow keys!

Quickly Insert Blank Rows or Columns

Forgotten some rows of data?

Here's one final annoyance, although it's more likely to be an annoyance with yourself rather than Excel! You've added row after row of data – perhaps a series of payments in date order – and then realised you've missed a few that should appear halfway down the sheet.

Insert a single row…

What can you do? Well, it's easily fixed. Let's say you need one blank row added above row 10. Just move the mouse to the left of the cells, where the row numbers appear, right-click on the **10** and choose **Insert** from the context menu. Everything from row 10 downwards moves down by one row, giving you a blank row at row 10.

… or several rows at once

What if you needed two or three rows there, rather than just one? Well, you could do exactly the same again (and again, and again…), but if you already knew you needed three rows, there's a quicker way than we used above. Move the mouse pointer to the **10**, press-and-hold the left mouse button and drag down until you reach the **12**. You've now highlighted three rows (10, 11 and 12). Right-click one of those highlighted row numbers and choose **Insert**: now everything moves down by three rows, giving you three blank rows from row 10.

> If you need to insert columns rather than rows, the steps are exactly the same, except that you'll be working with the column letters at the top of the grid rather than row numbers at the left.

Excel adjusts your formulas too, if necessary

So what does this do to your formulas? If you had a formula adding A10 and B10 together, for example, and you inserted a row further up, they've now become A11 and B11. The answer is: nothing at all! Excel will automatically adjust any formulas affected by the change to ensure they still do what they're supposed to.