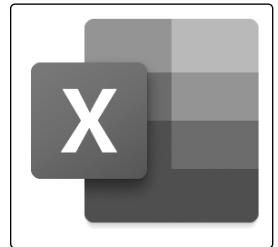


## Handy Tips to Create Better Spreadsheets and Work with Them More Easily

This article shows you how to:

- ✓ Work more efficiently using practical Excel tips
- ✓ Make spreadsheets easier to read and understand
- ✓ Reach useful options quickly when you need them

As I'm sure you've discovered, Microsoft Excel doesn't have to be complicated. It's just a matter of entering your figures and adding simple formulas to perform calculations on them. But no matter what your level of experience with Excel, there are sure to be options and methods you haven't come across that make things easier, and in this article you'll find our pick of all the most useful.

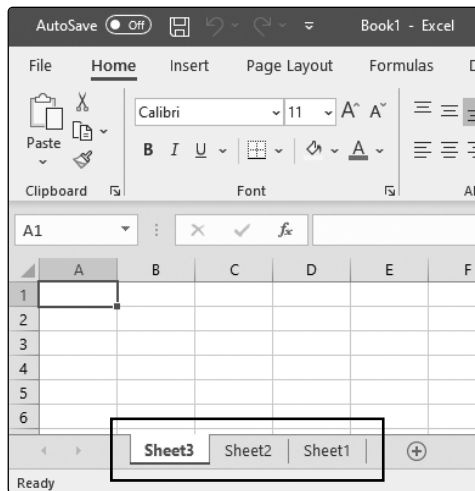


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- **Rename and Colour-code Worksheet Tabs** ..... E 915/2
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  - **Hide or Display Cells Containing Zero Values** ..... E 915/6
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  - **Adjust the Widths of Columns in a Jiffy** ..... E 915/13
  - **See Important Changes Instantly with Conditional Formatting** ..... E 915/15
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### Rename and Colour-code Worksheet Tabs

Each worksheet has its own tab

When you start Microsoft Excel and click on **Blank workbook**, it creates a new, unnamed spreadsheet document for you. This document consists of a single worksheet named **Sheet1**, and you can see that sheet's tab at the bottom-left of the Excel window. But a single document can contain any number of these sheets.



Multiple worksheets in one file saves time

It can make a lot of sense to use multiple worksheets within a single file (and you can add a new worksheet at any time by pressing **(Shift) + (F11)**). It means that you can keep related details together in a single spreadsheet file, making it easy to refer to older figures without having to find and open a different file. It also means that you can write formulas to compare or add-up the totals from the various sheets in the file.

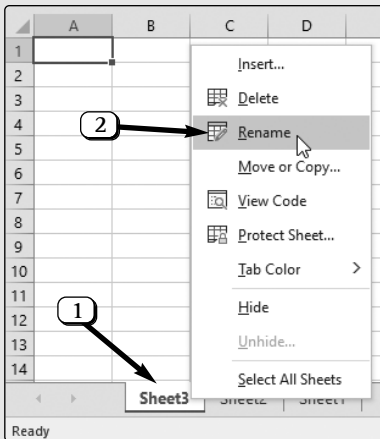
Make each sheet easier to identify

The one drawback is those rather anonymous titles given to the worksheets. As an example, let's say that you've created a spreadsheet file to keep track of your energy bills,

and you've used a different sheet to track each year's figures. Wouldn't it be helpful to see at a glance which sheet contained which year's bills?

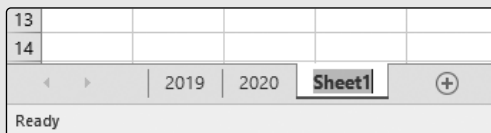
Fortunately, Excel allows you to give each tab a better name. Here's how to do it:

1. Start Excel and open the file whose tabs you want to rename. (Or, if you prefer, use the empty spreadsheet in front of you if you'd like to experiment first!)
2. Right-click the worksheet tab you want to rename (1) so that a context menu appears.



3. Choose Rename (2). This highlights the name of the tab, and you can now type a new name, such as '2021', in place of the anonymous 'Sheet' name, pressing (Enter) when you've finished.

Rename the worksheet



An alternative method is to select the tab you want to rename by clicking it, and then double-click it to highlight its name ready for changing.

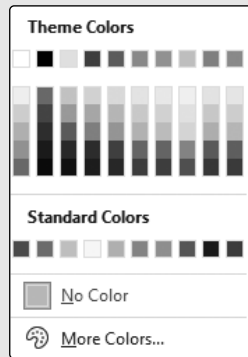
### Set colours for tabs

Another useful way to make the tabs more recognisable at a glance is to colour-code them. You might do this to draw attention to important worksheets, or to mark out a sheet that contains a different type of information to the others.

Here's how to choose or change a tab's colour:



1. Right-click the tab whose colour you want to change.
2. Move the mouse to the Tab Color item and a little colour-selection panel will open beside it.
3. Choose a colour for the tab by clicking one of the little colour swatches in either the 'Theme Colors' or 'Standard Colors' section.



### A greater choice of colours

If you'd like a wider choice of colours, click the **More Colors** item. In the Colors dialog that appears, click the colour you'd like to use and then click **OK**.

## Add Headings to Groups of Cells

### Keep tab names short!

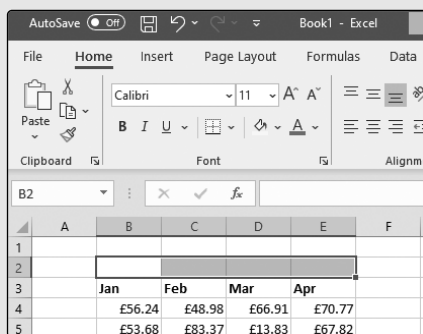
Although you can give each worksheet tab a more descriptive name than 'Sheet1', 'Sheet2' and so on by following the steps on page 3, it's best to keep these names fairly short: if the names are longer, the tabs become very wide, and you'll be forever scrolling back and forth through the row of tabs to find the one you want!

If you'd like to add a longer description of what a worksheet contains, there's a better way to do it: add a heading to the worksheet itself, above all your figures. This trick can also be useful if your worksheet contains different groups of figures – perhaps several columns containing expenses and several more containing income: you can add the headings 'Expenses' and 'Income' above each group of columns.

Add titles and headings to the worksheet itself

Here's how to do it:

1. Make sure you have a blank row of cells above your figures. If you don't, right-click the 1 at the far-left of the first row and choose **Insert** to insert a blank row above your figures.
2. In this blank row, select the cells stretching from just above your leftmost figure to just above your rightmost figure by clicking in the first cell and dragging the mouse to the right.



3. In the 'Alignment' group of the Ribbon's Home tab, click the **Merge & Center** button. The cells you've selected are then converted into a single wide cell.
4. Now type your heading into this cell and it will be automatically centred above your columns of data.

Merge a row of cells into one

Type your heading

A	B	C	D	E	F
	<b>Income</b>				
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	
	£56.24	£48.98	£66.91	£70.77	
	£53.68	£83.37	£13.83	£67.82	

## Hide or Display Cells Containing Zero Values

Figures for each month of the year

I'll explain this with an imaginary situation. Let's say that you buy old furniture, smarten it up and sell it at boot sales or even online. You want to keep track of how many items you've sold each month, and how much money you've made, and the obvious way to do that is to create a spreadsheet.

You set up your spreadsheet like the example below: for each month, you note the number of items sold and the price they were sold for, with a simple formula in the 'Total' column that multiplies the number sold by the price to produce your total income for the month.

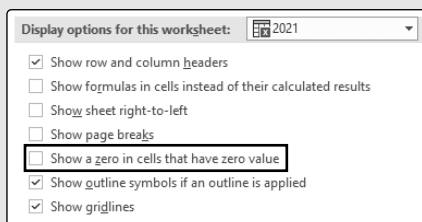
	A	B	C	D
1	<b>Month</b>	<b>Num. Sold</b>	<b>Price</b>	<b>Total</b>
2	January	5	23	=B2*C2
3	February	7	16	112
4	March	4	24	96
5	April	8	25	200
6	May			0
7	June			0
8	July			0
9	August			0

Future months show a zero

It's quick and easy to set up, but it has a flaw: the months which don't yet have any sales show their totals as 0 (zero),

because the formulas in those cells are multiplying empty cells. Rather than leaving out the formulas, you can use a handy Excel trick to have the zero cells remain empty:

1. Click the **File** tab and choose **Options** from the left-hand panel.
2. In the Excel Options window that opens, click **Advanced** in the left-hand panel.
3. Scroll down to the section headed 'Display options for this worksheet'.
4. Remove the tick beside **Show a zero in cells that have zero value** and click **OK**.



Switch off  
'zero values'

Even with the zero values hidden, you can still check whether any apparently empty cells contain formulas. Just switch to the **Formulas** tab on the Ribbon and click the **Show Formulas** button in the 'Formula Auditing' section; you can click the same button a second time to hide the formulas again.



## Change Number Formats Quickly from the Keyboard

If you create a spreadsheet like the one shown on page 6, the columns headings tell you what the cells below them are

What do the numbers mean?

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supposed to represent: the contents of column 'B' are just ordinary numbers, whereas the figures in column 'C' represent amounts of money in pounds. Likewise, the totals in column 'D' are also currency values.

Add currency symbols to monetary values

That's all well and good, but wouldn't it be better if figures in columns 'C' and 'D' actually looked like numbers in pounds and pence, with pound symbols, decimal points, and two digits for the pennies?

	A	B	C	D
1	<b>Month</b>	<b>Num. Sold</b>	<b>Price</b>	<b>Total</b>
2	January	5	£23.00	£115.00
3	February	7	£16.00	£112.00
4	March	4	£24.00	£96.00
5	April	8	£25.00	£200.00

The usual way

To do that, just select the two columns (or the cells in those columns), right-click one of the selected column headers or cells and choose **Format Cells**. In the dialog that appears, choose the **Number** tab, click **Currency** in the list on the left, and then click **OK**.

Rather than right-clicking, an alternative way to open this **Format Cells** dialog is by pressing the key combination **(Ctrl) + (1)** (the number '1' key on the top row of the keyboard).

The quick way – use the keyboard

However, if you already know which number format you want to apply to the selected columns or cells, you can select it quickly just by typing the appropriate key combination:

- **(Ctrl) + (Shift) + (#)**: the 'General' format, for numbers with no particular format.
- **(Ctrl) + (Shift) + (1)**: the 'Number' format, which displays numbers to two decimal places and separates thousands with a comma for better readability.



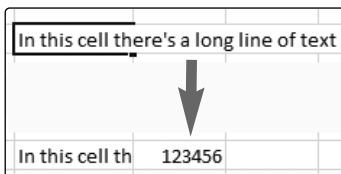
- **Ctrl** + **Shift** + **4**: the 'Currency' format, showing a pound symbol and two decimal places.
- **Ctrl** + **Shift** + **5**: the 'Percent' format, displaying the figure with a % symbol.
- **Ctrl** + **Shift** + **6**: the 'Scientific' format.

To use these key combinations in a cell, the cell has to be selected first, but not 'active' – in other words, you shouldn't be able to see the text cursor blinking in the cell. If you can see the text cursor, just click a different cell then click the first cell again to select it.



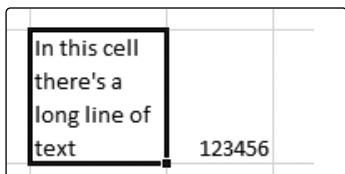
## Set Manual Line Breaks for Text in a Cell

Once in a while you'll want to type a fairly long line of text into a cell. You can read the text while you're typing it, and the whole line remains visible afterwards as long as the cell to its right remains empty. However, as soon as you type something into its neighbouring cell, you'll only be able to see the beginning of the long line of text you typed.



A long line of text won't fit in the cell

There's a simple reason for this: the default formatting of a cell doesn't include line breaks, so Excel doesn't try to 'wrap' your text on to multiple lines. If you need to wrap the text, making the cell (and thus the row containing it) taller, you can do so easily:



Excel doesn't wrap text

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1. Select the cell, row, column, or group of cells whose text you want to wrap.
2. Right-click one of the selected cells, or the header of a selected row or column, and choose **Format Cells**.
3. In the dialog that appears, switch to the **Alignment** tab.
4. In the 'Text control' section, tick the box beside **Wrap text** and click **OK**.



If you want to undo the text wrapping, select the same cell(s) again, go back to the Format Cells dialog and remove the tick you added in step 4.

**Wrap the text wherever you choose**

Using the method above, however, the text won't necessarily be wrapped in the way you like. In addition, the need to select, right-click, and then navigate the Format Cells dialog makes it a bit fiddly.

Here's a trick you may prefer to use instead:



1. Select the cell containing the long line of text.
2. Position the text cursor immediately before the word that should be moved down to a new line.
3. Press the key combination **(Alt) + (Enter)**: this inserts a line break before that word. In the example below, a line break has been inserted before the word 'a'.

In this cell there's a long line of text	123456
---	--------

4. Do the same anywhere else in the cell if you need to create more line breaks in the text.
5. Press **(Enter)** when you've finished to keep the changes.

If you know in advance that the text you're about to type will be too wide for the cell and will need line breaks, you can type them as you go: when you reach a point in the text where you want to start a new line, press **Alt** + **Enter**.



After pressing **Enter** to leave the cell, you may find that Excel has seemingly ignored your line breaks and wrapped the text in its own way instead. If so, the reason is that the column containing the cell is too narrow: just widen the column, and when it's wide enough, Excel will revert to using the line breaks you entered.

Make sure the column is wide enough

## Add Quick Notes and Hints to a Cell

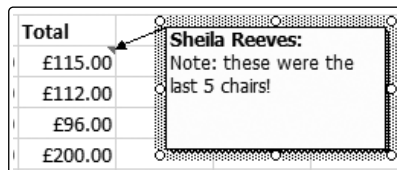
If you have a spreadsheet that contains just figures, over time you may forget how you arrived at those numbers or what particular figures were supposed to represent.

Explanations can be helpful

In these situations, Excel's 'Note' feature is useful, and it's easy to use. Select the cell to which you'd like to add a note, right-click the cell and choose **New Note**. A little yellow box will appear beside the cell, with your name shown at the top of it, and you can type any text you like as a comment associated with that cell.

You can add notes to cells

After typing the note, just click anywhere outside the yellow box and its text will be saved. You can recognise cells that



Total	
£115.00	Sheila Reeves: Note: these were the last 5 chairs!
£112.00	
£96.00	
£200.00	

have an associated comment by the little red triangle that appears in the top-right corner of the cell.

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The mouse pointer must be over the cell

The drawback to this system is that the little triangle isn't particularly obvious, and the note itself only appears if you move the mouse pointer over the cell. So, if you tend to move around your spreadsheet using the keyboard rather than the mouse, you might never see the note.

Price	Total
£23.00	£115.00
£16.00	£112.00

An alternative solution

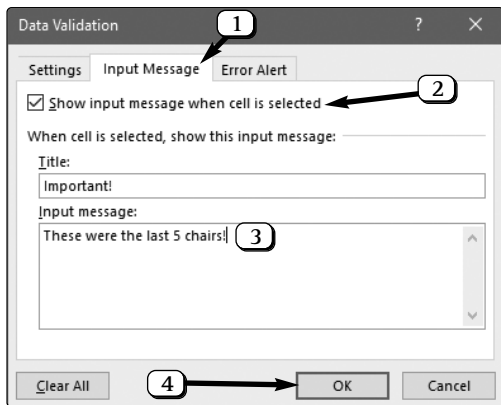
Fortunately, Excel offers an alternative to these notes, one that many users won't have come across called an 'Input Message'. Using this option, the note appears whenever the cell is selected, whether you select it using the mouse or the keyboard.

Here's how to use the Input Message feature:



Type your note for the cell

1. Select the cell to which you'd like to add a message.
2. Switch to the **Data** tab on the Ribbon.
3. In the 'Data Tools' group click the **Data Validation** button.
4. In the Data Validation dialog that appears, pictured in the next screenshot, switch to the **Input Message** tab (1).
5. Make sure there's a tick beside **Show input message when cell is selected** (2), and then use the two boxes below to type a short title for the message (if you want to include one) and the text of the message itself (3).
6. Click **OK** to confirm the text you've typed and close this dialog (4).



From now on, whenever you select the cell you chose in step 1 above, you'll see the Input Message you just entered in a little box beside or below the cell, and it will remain visible until you select a different cell. The 'title' (if you entered one) appears in bold text with the message text in ordinary type below it.

The message remains visible

Month	Num. Sold	Price	Total	
January	5	£23.00	£115.00	
February	7	£16.00	£112.00	<b>Important!</b> These were the last 5 chairs!
March	4	£24.00	£96.00	
April	8	£25.00	£200.00	
May				

## Adjust the Widths of Columns in a Jiffy

Every time you start work on a new spreadsheet, Excel makes each column the same width. As you enter data into the cells, you can make columns wider or narrower as you need to, but there's an extra-quick way of doing it that saves you the need to play around with each column's width individually:

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Move to the join between columns

1. Select one or more columns in your worksheet. To select a single column, just click the column letter at the top; to select several columns, press the left mouse button on the leftmost column letter and then drag the mouse pointer to the right until all the required columns are selected.
2. Now place the mouse pointer over the join between two of the selected column letters, or the join between the selected column and the column to its right. When you're over the join, the mouse pointer will change to a horizontal double-arrow shape with a vertical line through it, as pictured below.

	A1			fx	Month
	A	B	C	D	E
1	Month	Num. Sold	Price	Total	
2	January	5	£23.00	#####	
3	February	7	£16.00	#####	
4	March	4	£24.00	£96.00	
5	April	8	£25.00	#####	
6	May			0	
7	June			0	

Double-click

3. Now just double-click. Excel automatically resizes the selected column (or columns) to make them exactly the right width for their contents.

	A1			fx	Month
	A	B	C	D	
1	Month	Num. Sold	Price	Total	
2	January	5	£23.00	£115.00	
3	February	7	£16.00	£112.00	
4	March	4	£24.00	£96.00	
5	April	8	£25.00	£200.00	

## See Important Changes Instantly with Conditional Formatting

It's in the nature of spreadsheets that figures change automatically: you add or alter a figure somewhere and Excel updates the cells containing formulas. Some of those changes might be important, so perhaps you'd like your attention to be drawn to them?

Have your attention drawn to changes in cells

To give you an example, you might have a spreadsheet in which you keep track of your monthly income and outgoings, with a cell that shows your running balance (income minus expenses). If that cell ever shows a negative figure, it means you're running at a loss, so you'd like to be sure you notice that.

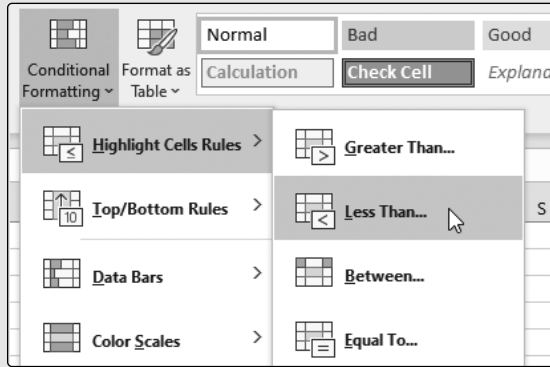
An Excel feature named Conditional Formatting can do that for you. In a nutshell, you select a cell, specify a 'condition' (such as the cell's figure being less than zero), and specify 'formatting' to be applied if that situation occurs (such as making its text red, or its background yellow) to ensure it catches your eye.

Use Conditional Formatting

Here's how to set up Conditional Formatting using that situation as an example:

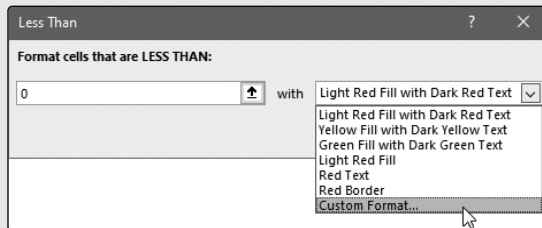
1. Select the cell you want Excel to watch for changes (or, if you prefer, select multiple cells or an entire row or column).
2. On the **Home** tab of the Ribbon, in the 'Styles' group, click the **Conditional Formatting** button.
3. Move the mouse to **Highlight Cells Rules**.
4. On the submenu, choose **Less Than** (because in our example we want to watch out for the figure in our cell being 'less than' zero). You'll notice you could also choose **Greater Than**, **Between** or **Equal To**, allowing you to specify any situation that might occur.





Specify the target figure to watch for

5. In the little Less Than dialog that appears, type the number 0 in the 'Format cells that are LESS THAN' box (since that's the number we want Excel to watch for), then open the drop-down list to its right and choose Custom Format.



Choose formatting for this cell

6. Now you're looking at the Format Cells dialog where you choose how the chosen cell should look when its figure does drop below zero. You've arrived at its Font tab, and here you might like to specify that the text in the cell switches to bold or italic, or changes colour.
7. On the Border tab you can specify a particular style and colour of border that should appear around the cell when the condition is met.



8. On the Fill tab you can choose a background colour for the cell.
9. Having chosen your formatting for the cell, click **OK**. That takes you back to the little Less Than dialog: click **OK** here too.

You've finished, and this Conditional Formatting takes effect immediately. If you make a change somewhere in this spreadsheet that results in that cell's figure dropping below zero, it immediately takes on the formatting you've chosen for it, and it remains that way until another change lifts the figure above zero again.

If you want to change the conditional formatting you've set, select the cell, click the **Conditional Formatting** button on the **Home** tab again and choose **Manage Rules**: here you can select the rule you've just created and choose **Edit Rule** to make changes to it.

If you want to remove the conditional formatting from the cell, select the cell and then choose **Conditional Formatting** > **Clear Rules** > **Clear Rules from Selected Cells**.

Done

Edit the conditional formatting...

...or remove it

### Work Faster by Naming Important Cells

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 some unwieldy typing to contend with:

Difficulty finding and remembering cell references?

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

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

=TotalApril+TotalMay+TotalJune

Give 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 three-step job:



1. Click the cell you want to name (1).
2. Click in the 'Name Box' (2) at the far left of the formula bar, which currently shows that cell's reference and in its place type whatever name you choose for the cell (3).
3. Press **Enter** to confirm it and you've finished.

