

FORMATTING CELLS IN EXCEL – MAKING YOUR DATA EASY TO READ

BOLD HEADING
Makes the column headings easy to recognize.

CURRENCY FORMAT
Excel adds the dollar sign, commas, and decimal places.

PERCENTAGE
Shows values as percentages for quick comparison.

BORDERS
Borders separate information into clear sections.

CENTERED TITLE
Merging and centering creates a clear, professional title.

DATE FORMAT
Dates display in a consistent, easy-to-read format.

CELL FILL COLOR
Subtle shading highlights headings and totals.

FORMAT PAINTER
Copy formatting from one cell and apply it to another.

CURT'S QUICK TIP
If you aren't sure where a formatting command is located, start with the **Home** tab. Roughly **80 percent** of the formatting you'll ever perform in Excel can be found there.

! CONTENTS STAY THE SAME. FORMATTING CHANGES ONLY THE APPEARANCE.

Category	Budget	Actual	Difference	% of Budget	Due Date	Notes
Mortgage/Rent	\$1,800.00	\$1,800.00	\$0.00	100.0%	5/1/2027	Principle & interest
Utilities	\$300.00	\$265.43	\$34.57	88.5%	5/10/2027	Electric, water, trash
Groceries	\$600.00	\$587.26	\$12.74	97.9%	5/15/2027	Includes household items
Transportation	\$250.00	\$231.54	\$18.46	92.6%	5/5/2027	Gas and maintenance
Insurance	\$150.00	\$150.00	\$0.00	100.0%	5/1/2027	Home and auto
Entertainment	\$200.00	\$186.75	\$13.25	93.4%	5/20/2027	Dining out, movies, etc.
Other	\$100.00	\$92.18	\$7.82	92.2%	5/25/2027	Miscellaneous
TOTAL	\$3,400.00	\$3,313.16	\$86.84	97.4%		

Formatting Cells in Excel

Making Your Data Easy to Read

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

More Than Meets the Eye

One of the biggest surprises for new Excel users is that every cell has **two identities**. The first is its **contents**—the text, number, date, or formula stored inside the cell. The second is its **appearance**—the way Excel displays that information. Formatting changes only the appearance of a cell; it does not change the underlying value.

For example, the number **1250** can appear in several different ways:

- 1,250
- \$1,250.00
- 1250.00
- 1.25E+03
- 1250%

Although these entries look quite different, Excel is storing exactly the same number. Understanding this distinction is one of the keys to becoming comfortable with spreadsheets.

Formatting Text

Most spreadsheets contain far more than numbers. They also include titles, headings, labels, and explanatory notes that help readers understand the information. Excel allows you to change the font, font size, color, boldface, italics, underlining, strikethrough, and cell background color. A few carefully chosen formatting changes can make the difference between a confusing worksheet and one that's easy to understand at a glance.

Where to find it: Select the cell or cells you want to format, then choose the **Home** tab on the Ribbon. Most text-formatting commands are located in the **Font** group.

Formatting Numbers

Formatting numbers is one of Excel's greatest strengths. Rather than typing dollar signs, commas, decimal places, or percent symbols yourself, let Excel handle the job automatically. The program includes built-in formats for currency, accounting, percentages, dates, times, fractions, scientific notation, and ordinary numbers.

Using the proper number format not only makes a worksheet easier to read but also ensures that values are displayed consistently throughout your workbook.

Where to find it: Select the cells, then choose the **Home** tab. The **Number** group contains the Number Format drop-down list along with buttons for Currency, Accounting, Percent Style, Comma Style, Increase Decimal, and Decrease Decimal.

Aligning Your Data

Not every entry belongs on the left side of a cell. Excel lets you align information horizontally and vertically, wrap text within a cell, merge cells for titles, and even rotate text for special headings.

As a general rule, text is left-aligned, numbers are right-aligned, and worksheet titles are centered. These simple conventions make spreadsheets easier to scan because similar information lines up naturally.

Where to find it: Select the cells and use the **Alignment** group on the **Home** tab.

Adding Borders

Without borders, a large worksheet can resemble one endless sea of numbers. Borders separate information into logical sections and make reports much easier to follow. Excel lets you apply top, bottom, left, right, inside, outside, thick, thin, and double-line borders.

Like most formatting tools, borders work best when used sparingly. A few well-placed lines usually communicate more effectively than surrounding every cell with heavy boxes.

Where to find it: Select the cells, then click the **Borders** drop-down button in the **Font** group on the **Home** tab.

Using Fill Colors

Background colors can improve readability by separating one section of a worksheet from another. Soft shades of gray, blue, or yellow work well for headings, while darker colors can emphasize totals or important calculations.

The temptation is to use every color available, but restraint usually produces a more professional appearance. Color should guide the reader's eye—not distract it.

Where to find it: Select the cells and click the **Fill Color** (paint bucket) button in the **Font** group on the **Home** tab.

Cell Styles

If you're unsure how to combine fonts, colors, borders, and shading, Excel includes a collection of professionally designed **Cell Styles**. With a single click you can apply a coordinated appearance to headings, totals, warning messages, or input cells. These predefined styles provide an attractive, consistent look without requiring much effort.

Where to find it: Select the cells, then choose **Home** → **Styles** → **Cell Styles**.

Format Painter

One of Excel's most useful time-saving tools is **Format Painter**. Suppose you've carefully formatted one cell exactly the way you want it. Rather than repeating each formatting step for other cells, simply click **Format Painter** and then click the destination cell. Excel copies all the formatting while leaving the contents unchanged.

It's one of those small features that can save an enormous amount of time on large worksheets.

Where to find it: Select the formatted cell, then choose **Home** → **Clipboard** → **Format Painter** (the paintbrush icon). Click another cell to copy the formatting, or double-click **Format Painter** to apply the same formatting to several cells before turning it off.

Curt's Quick Tip

If you aren't sure where a formatting command is located, start with the **Home** tab. Roughly **80 percent of the formatting you'll ever perform in Excel** can be found there. Becoming

comfortable with the Home tab is one of the quickest ways to increase both your confidence and your productivity.

Good Formatting Is Good Communication

Formatting won't make your calculations more accurate, but it will make your spreadsheets easier to understand. A well-designed worksheet guides the reader's eye, emphasizes important information, reduces errors, and presents your work professionally.

Think of formatting as the punctuation of a spreadsheet. Just as punctuation makes written language easier to read, thoughtful formatting transforms rows and columns of numbers into information that people can quickly understand and confidently use.

Before long you'll discover that good formatting isn't about making a spreadsheet prettier—it's about making it communicate more effectively. A few minutes spent choosing the proper number formats, borders, colors, and alignment can make the difference between a worksheet that merely stores information and one that tells its story clearly.