Mastering Excel: One Tip at a Time

By Donna Payne, PayneGroup, Inc.

For a short while, before starting PayneGroup, I worked over at Microsoft in the Excel group. This was my dream job at the time because I could help to shape – even in a small way, what was then, and what has remained one of my favorite software applications ever created.

I call Excel the great equalizer. It doesn't matter how well you did in high school or college math. Just open Excel, insert a function through an easy-to-use wizard, and in two seconds flat, you have the correct answer.

There are a few thousand Excel tips I've amassed over the years. Here are just a few to get us started.

Navigation and Select Know-How

One of the best things I learned early on were some shortcuts for navigation and data selection. Here are a few to get you started:

- To cycle through all open workbooks – one at a time, press **Ctrl+Tab**.
- To select the active row, press **Shift+Spacebar**.
- To select the active column, press **Ctrl+Spacebar**
- To navigate to the last cell to the right, left, up or down, press **Ctrl plus the arrow key** in the direction you wish to go.

Another of my favorite shortcuts is to select all data in the active range by pressing **Ctrl+Shift+***. So if you have data in cells A1 through K4, and the active cell is within that range, pressing the shortcut combination selects the range A1:K4.

Making Cell Contents Invisible

The contents of any cell can be hidden by applying a little formatting. Just click within the cell, right-click and choose Format Cells. On the Number tab, in the Category list, select Custom. Replace any text that appears in the Type box and with ;;; (three semicolons). Click OK and the data within the cell is no longer visible (in the cell). One problem with this method that is often overlooked is that the Formula bar will still show the original content of the cell when the cell is active.

Text to Numbers – No Trick, All Treat

Sometimes you have no control over the format of the information that you receive. Sometimes data is imported from programs that, by default, format all information as text rather than numbers – even if they are truly numbers. There is a trick in Excel where you can quickly reformat numbers as numbers.

1. In an empty cell, type 1 and press Enter.
2. Click back in the cell where you entered 1 and Copy (Ctrl+C).
3. Select the range of cells to convert from Text to a Number (for instance, A1:A100).
4. On the Home tab, in the Clipboard group, click Paste Special, then Multiply.
5. Click OK and note that the numbers are now correctly formatted as a number rather than text.

There are many tricks with transpose but we'll cover those later, along with filtering and PivotTables, functions and more.

About the Author

Donna Payne is the founder and CEO of PayneGroup (www.thepaynegroup.com). She and the company have authored 13 books on Microsoft Office, develop globally used products and offer training and professional services worldwide. Payne is the recipient of the Thought Leader of the Year Award (2013) from the International Legal Technology Association, and is a frequent speaker on technology and privacy.

Donna would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge her former math teacher for telling her that she was a dismal failure at math and would never succeed. My first few Excel books would beg to disagree.