

6 Powerful Excel Features Most People Never Use

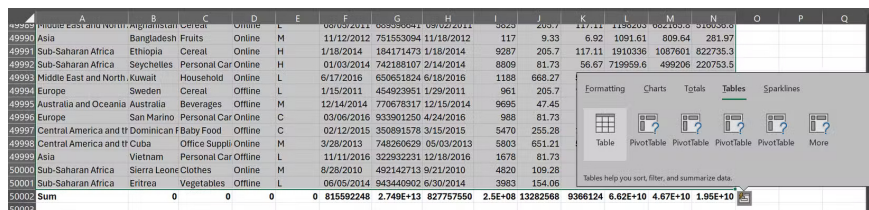
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Even the simplest spreadsheets—budgets, lists, trackers, etc.—can benefit from powerful features in Microsoft Excel that people often avoid because they seem too complicated. In fact, they're easier than you think and can save hours of work.

6. Quick Analysis

Let's say you have a spreadsheet containing sales records. When you highlight some cells, the Quick Analysis tool in Excel will immediately suggest doing the following for you:

1. Calculate total revenue or number of units sold
2. Add a chart you can use to visualize total profit by region
3. Apply color grading to highlight your most profitable orders
4. Convert data into Excel tables for easier filtering and sorting



Here's how it works: When you select any range of cells in Excel, a small icon will appear in the lower-right corner (it looks like a square with three lines and a lightning bolt). Click this icon or simply press **Ctrl + Q**, Excel will immediately display a menu with five analysis categories: Formatting, Charts, Totals, Tables, and Sparklines.

Within each of these categories, you'll find options tailored to your specific data. When you highlighted 15 rows with all 14 columns from your sales records spreadsheet, Excel suggested Clustered Column, Stacked Column, Clustered Bar, and Stacked Bar charts in the Charts category.

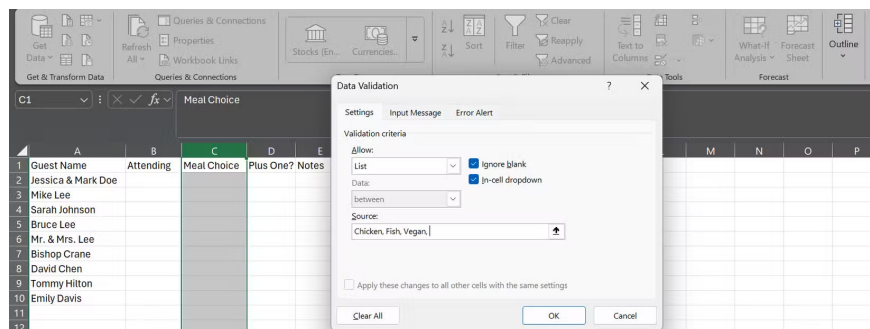
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q
1	Region	Country	Item Type	Sales Chan	Order Prio	Order Date	Order ID	Ship Date	Units Sold	Unit Price	Unit Cost	Total Reve	Total Cost	Total Profit			
2	Sub-Saharan Africa	Namibia	Household	Offline	M	8/31/2015	897751939	10/12/2015	3604	668.27	502.54	2406445	1811154	597290.9			
3	Europe	Iceland	Baby Food	Online	H	11/20/2015	599480426	01/09/2011	8435	255.28	159.42	2153287	1344708	808579.1			
4	Europe	Russia	Meat	Online	L	6/22/2017	538911855	6/25/2017	4848	421.89	364.69	2045323	1788017	277305.6			
5	Europe	Moldova	Meat	Online	L	2/28/2012	459845054	3/20/2012	7235	421.89	364.69	3048155	2634885	413270			
6	Europe	Malta	Cereal	Online	M	08/12/2010	626391351	9/13/2010	1975	205.7	117.11	406257.5	231292.3	174965.3			
7	Asia	Indonesia	Meat	Online	H	8/20/2010	472974574	8/27/2010	2542	421.89	364						
8	Sub-Saharan Africa	Djibouti	Household	Online	M	02/03/2011	854331052	03/03/2011	4398	668.27	501						
9	Greece	Household	Offline	L		09/11/2015	895509612	9/28/2015	49	668.27	501						
10	Sub-Saharan Africa	Cameroon	Cosmetics	Offline	M	1/31/2014	241871583	02/04/2014	4031	437.2	261						
11	Sub-Saharan Africa	Nigeria	Cosmetics	Online	C	11/21/2015	409090793	12/07/2015	7911	437.2	261						
12	Sub-Saharan Africa	Senegal	Fruits	Offline	M	8/29/2016	733153569	10/05/2016	5288	9.33							
13	Middle East and North	Afghanistan	Cosmetics	Offline	L	10/21/2016	620358741	12/01/2016	6792	437.2	261						
14	Asia	India	Vegetables	Online	C	3/21/2010	897317636	04/05/2010	5084	154.06	94						
15	Middle East and North	Lebanon	Vegetables	Online	L	10/15/2010	660954082	11/19/2010	9855	154.06	94						
16	Middle East and North	Turkey	Office Suppli	Online	L	10/04/2010	428504407	11/13/2010	2831	651.21	524.96	1843576	1486162	357413.8			
17	Middle East and North	Iraq	Cosmetics	Offline	M	10/14/2014	787517440	10/19/2014	2766	437.2	263.33	1209295	728370.8	480924.4			

5. Data Validation

Imagine you're collecting RSVPs for your wedding. You'll need guests to confirm their attendance, select their preferred food, and possibly indicate whether they're bringing someone else. Without Data Validation, you'll likely get a chaotic array of responses: *Yes, y, Attending, Chicken, Veggie, I, one* , or even fields that are completely blank.

Here's an example of how you can avoid such a data cleanup headache:

1. Highlight the Meal Choice column and go to the **Data** tab .
2. Find **Data Validation** in **Data Tools** . You'll recognize it by the icon with two rectangles, one showing a green check mark and the other showing a red error mark.
3. Click on it, select **List** under **Allow** and enter the allowed values, separated by commas.
4. Click **OK** > **Apply** , depending on your version, and you're done!



Now, when someone tries to insert a meal outside the allowed list, they will get an error message.

4. PivotTables

PivotTables in Excel may seem complicated, but they are actually one of the easiest ways to make sense of large data sets. Most people avoid them because they think only advanced users need them. But that's not the case.

Let's say you have a 30,000-row sales spreadsheet and your boss wants to see total profits by region.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
1	Region	Country	Item Type	Sales Chai	Order Prio	Order Date	Order ID	Ship Date	Units Sold	Unit Price	Unit Cost	Total Reve	Total Cost	Total Profit	
2	Sub-Saharan Africa	Namibia	Household	Offline	M	8/31/2015	897751939	10/12/2015	3604	668.27	502.54	2408445	1811154	597290.9	
3	Europe	Iceland	Baby Food	Online	H	11/20/2010	599480426	01/09/2011	8435	255.28	159.42	2153287	1344708	808579.1	
4	Europe	Russia	Meat	Online	L	6/22/2017	538911855	6/25/2017	4848	421.89	364.69	2045323	1768017	277305.6	
5	Europe	Moldova	Meat	Online	L	2/28/2012	459845054	3/20/2012	7225	421.89	364.69	3048155	2634885	413270	
6	Europe	Malta	Cereal	Online	M	08/12/2010	626391351	9/13/2010	1975	205.7	117.11	406257.5	231292.3	174965.3	
7	Asia	Indonesia	Meat	Online	H	8/20/2010	472974574	8/27/2010	2542	421.89	364.69	1072444	927042	145402.4	
8	Sub-Saharan Africa	Djibouti	Household	Online	M	02/03/2011	854331052	03/03/2011	4396	668.27	502.54	2939051	2210171	728890.5	
9	Europe	Greece	Household	Online	L	09/11/2015	895509612	9/26/2015	49	668.27	502.54	32745.23	24624.46	8120.77	
10	Sub-Saharan Africa	Cameroon	Cosmetics	Offline	M	1/31/2014	241871583	02/04/2014	4031	437.2	263.33	1762353	1061483	700870	
11	Sub-Saharan Africa	Nigeria	Cosmetics	Online	C	11/21/2015	409090793	12/07/2015	7911	437.2	263.33	3458689	2083204	1375486	
12	Sub-Saharan Africa	Senegal	Fruits	Offline	M	8/29/2016	733183569	10/05/2016	5288	9.33	6.92	49337.04	36592.96	12744.08	
13	Middle East and North	Afghanistan	Cosmetics	Offline	L	10/21/2016	620358741	12/01/2016	6792	437.2	263.33	2969462	1788537	1180925	
14	Asia	India	Vegetables	Online	C	3/21/2010	897317636	04/05/2010	5084	154.06	90.93	783241	462288.1	320952.9	
15	Middle East and North	Lebanon	Vegetables	Online	L	10/15/2010	660954082	11/19/2010	9855	154.06	90.93	1518261	896115.2	622146.2	

Instead of spending hours writing formulas and filtering data, you can create a PivotTable in about 30 seconds:

1. Select any cell in the data.
2. Go to **Insert > PivotTable > From Table/Range** .
3. Select **New Worksheet** and click **OK** .
4. Drag **Region** to the **Rows** area and **Total Profit** to the **Values** area .

Immediately, you'll see each region and its total profit neatly summarized.

3. Flash Fill

This feature is basically a way for Excel to read your mind. You tell Excel what you want by entering an example or two, and Excel automatically figures out the pattern and does the rest.

If you have a column of full names, such as Jessica Doe and Sarah Lee, and need to separate the last name into a separate column, you don't need to type each name manually. Just type **Doe** in the cell next to Jessica Doe, press **Enter** , then start typing **Lee** in the next cell. Excel will recognize the action and offer to complete the entire column for you.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	Guest Full Name (as received)	Guest Email Address	Guest (First Name)	Guest (Last Name)	Meal Choice	Dietary Notes	Attending	Plus One?
2	Jessica Doe	jess.doe@email.com	Jessica	Doe				
3	Mr. & Mrs. Mark Johnson	mjfamily@email.com	Mark	Johnson				
4	SARAH LEE	sarah.lee@email.com	SARAH	LEE				
5	David Chen	dchen@email.com	David	Chen				
6	Emily Davis	emilyd@email.com	Emily	Davis				
7	Liam O'Connell	lioc@email.com	Liam	O'Connell				
8	Alice & Bob Smith	asmitty@email.com	Bob	Smith				
9	Jessica Doe	jess.doe@email.com	Jessica	Doe				
10	Mr. & Mrs. Mark Johnson	mjfamily@email.com	Mark	Johnson				
11	SARAH LEE	sarah.lee@email.com	SARAH	LEE				
12	David Chen	dchen@email.com	David	Chen				
13	Emily Davis	emilyd@email.com	Emily	Davis				
14	Liam O'Connell	lioc@email.com	Liam	O'Connell				
15	Alice & Bob Smith	asmitty@email.com	Bob	Smith				

2. Formula Auditing

We've all been there: A formula suddenly throws a weird error, and you wonder if you made a typo somewhere in row 247. Luckily, Excel's Formula Auditing tool can pinpoint the exact error in just a few seconds.

Let's say you're calculating profit margins across hundreds of rows. You might have a Total Margin column (divide Total Profit by Total Revenue) and an Adjusted Margin column (multiply Total Margin by 0.9).

Region	Country	Item Type	Sales Char	Order Prio	Order Date	Order ID	Ship Date	Units Sold	Unit Price	Unit Cost	Total Reve	Total Cost	Total Profit	Total Marg	Adjusted Margin
Sub-Sahar	Namibia	Household	Offline	M	8/31/2015	897751939	10/12/2015	3604	668.27	502.54	2408445	1811154	597290.9	0.247999	0.223199
Europe	Iceland	Baby Food	Online	H	11/20/2010	599480426	01/09/2011	8435	255.28	159.42	2153287	1344708	808579.1		
Europe	Russia	Meat	Online	L	6/22/2017	538911855	6/25/2017	4848	421.89	364.69	2045323	1768017	277305.6		
Europe	Moldova	Meat	Online	L	2/28/2012	459845054	3/20/2012	7225	421.89	364.69	3048155	2634085	412270		
Europe	Malta	Cereal	Online	M	08/12/2010	626391351	9/13/2010	1975	205.7	117.11	406257.5	231292.3	174965.3		
Asia	Indonesia	Meat	Online	H	8/20/2010	472974574	8/27/2010	2542	421.89	364.69	1072444	927042	145402.4		
Sub-Sahar	Djibouti	Household	Online	M	02/03/2011	854331052	03/03/2011	4398	668.27	502.54	0	2210171	728880.5		
Europe	Greece	Household	Online	L	09/11/2015	895509612	9/26/2015	49	668.27	502.54	32745.23	24624.46	8120.77		
Sub-Sahar	Cameroon	Cosmetics	Offline	M	1/31/2014	241871583	02/04/2014	4031	437.2	263.33	1762353	1061483	700870		

Everything looks perfect until you scroll down and see error messages scattered throughout the data. That's where Formula Auditing comes in.

Highlight any cells that show errors and go to the **Formulas** tab . Click **Trace Precedents** , and Excel will draw arrows pointing to the exact cells where the formula entered the error. With experience, you'll usually spot the problem right away - maybe the total sales are zero, you're referencing an empty cell, or the cell contains text instead of numbers.

The screenshot shows the Excel ribbon with the 'Formulas' tab selected. The 'Trace Precedents' button is highlighted. Below the ribbon, the same data table is visible, but with some cells in the 'Adjusted Margin' column highlighted in yellow, indicating errors.

Trace Dependents works in reverse and can be even more useful. You can highlight any cell to see what other formulas rely on that cell. This is extremely useful when you are about to delete or modify a cell and want to know what else might be wrong.

1. Conditional Formatting

Spreadsheets are just numbers until you put them into context. Take a budget spreadsheet, for example. You'll have to look at it for a while before you can understand how much you've actually spent throughout the month.

Instead of manually comparing your actual spending to your budget across twenty different categories, you can use Conditional Formatting to bring your spreadsheet to life, so you can see at a glance where you overspent and where you could save. In your monthly budget, have a Variance column that shows the difference between your budgeted amount and your actual spending. Then let Conditional Formatting do the hard work.

The screenshot shows the 'Conditional Formatting' menu open, with options like 'Greater Than...', 'Less Than...', 'Between...', 'Equal To...', 'Text that Contains...', 'A Date Occurring...', and 'Duplicate Values...'. Below the menu, a budget spreadsheet is visible with columns for 'Category', 'Budgeted Amount', 'Actual Spend', and 'Variance (Actual - Budget)'. The 'Variance' column is highlighted in yellow, indicating conditional formatting rules.

Category	Budgeted Amount	Actual Spend	Variance (Actual - Budget)
INCOME			
Salary	\$3,500.00	\$3,500.00	\$0.00
Freelance Income	\$500.00	\$750.00	\$250.00
FIXED EXPENSES			
Rent/Mortgage	\$1,200.00	\$1,200.00	\$0.00
Utilities	\$150.00	\$180.00	\$30.00
Internet	\$50.00	\$50.00	\$0.00
Loan Payment	\$250.00	\$250.00	\$0.00
Insurance	\$80.00	\$80.00	\$0.00
VARIABLE EXPENSES			
Groceries	\$400.00	\$450.00	\$50.00
Dining Out	\$100.00	\$150.00	\$50.00

First, select all the cells in the Variance column and click **Conditional Formatting** on the Home tab before doing this:

1. For overspending: Click **Highlight Cells Rules > Greater Than** , enter **0** in the cell, and choose a highlight color (perhaps a light red fill with bold red text).
2. For underspending: Go back to **Conditional Formatting > Highlight Cells Rules > Less Than** , enter 0 again, and choose a different color.
3. For exact spending: Use **Conditional Formatting > Highlight Cells Rules > Equal To** , enter 0 again and choose a different color.

Instantly, positive numbers (overspending) turn green, negative numbers (savings) turn red, and exact matches stay yellow. At a glance, you can see everything you need to know about your monthly spending.

The screenshot shows an Excel spreadsheet with the following data:

Category	Budgeted Amount	Actual Spend	Variance (Actual - Budget)	Last Month's Spend	Change %
INCOME					
Salary	USD 3,500.00	USD 3,500.00	USD 0.00	USD 3,500.00	0
Freelance Income	USD 500.00	USD 750.00	USD 250.00	USD 400.00	
FIXED EXPENSES					
Rent/Mortgage	USD 1,200.00	USD 1,200.00	USD 0.00	USD 1,200.00	0
Utilities	USD 150.00	USD 180.00	USD 30.00	USD 160.00	
Internet	USD 50.00	USD 50.00	USD 0.00	USD 50.00	
Loan Payment	USD 250.00	USD 250.00	USD 0.00	USD 250.00	
Insurance	USD 80.00	USD 80.00	USD 0.00	USD 80.00	
VARIABLE EXPENSES					
Groceries	USD 400.00	USD 450.00	USD 50.00	USD 380.00	
Dining Out	USD 100.00	USD 150.00	USD 50.00	USD 90.00	
Transportation	USD 80.00	USD 75.00	-USD 5.00	USD 85.00	
Entertainment	USD 120.00	USD 100.00	-USD 20.00	USD 130.00	
Personal Care	USD 60.00	USD 50.00	-USD 10.00	USD 65.00	
Miscellaneous	USD 50.00	USD 25.00	-USD 25.00	USD 40.00	
SAVINGS/INVESTMENTS					

Mastering even a few of these features can change the way you work in Excel. They're not just power tools, they can save you time and help you work like a pro.

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