



Simple Guide to Excel – Part 1

John Hookham presents a simple and slightly unorthodox approach to explaining the basics of Microsoft Excel.

Introduction

The majority of Excel training courses start with pupils entering text and numbers to produce a simple spreadsheet. After all Excel is a spreadsheet program and this is primarily what it is used for in the business world.

But taking this approach misses the key step that underpins all learning; understanding. All too often the pupil can produce the required spreadsheet by entering the correct data, totalling columns etc. This enables them to pass the certification, but in reality they have no real understanding of the fundamentals of Excel and how the program has been designed to operate.

The Cell

This is the rectangular box or container and a collection of boxes is used to make up the spreadsheet. The cell has two key aspects;

1. Position, and
2. Content

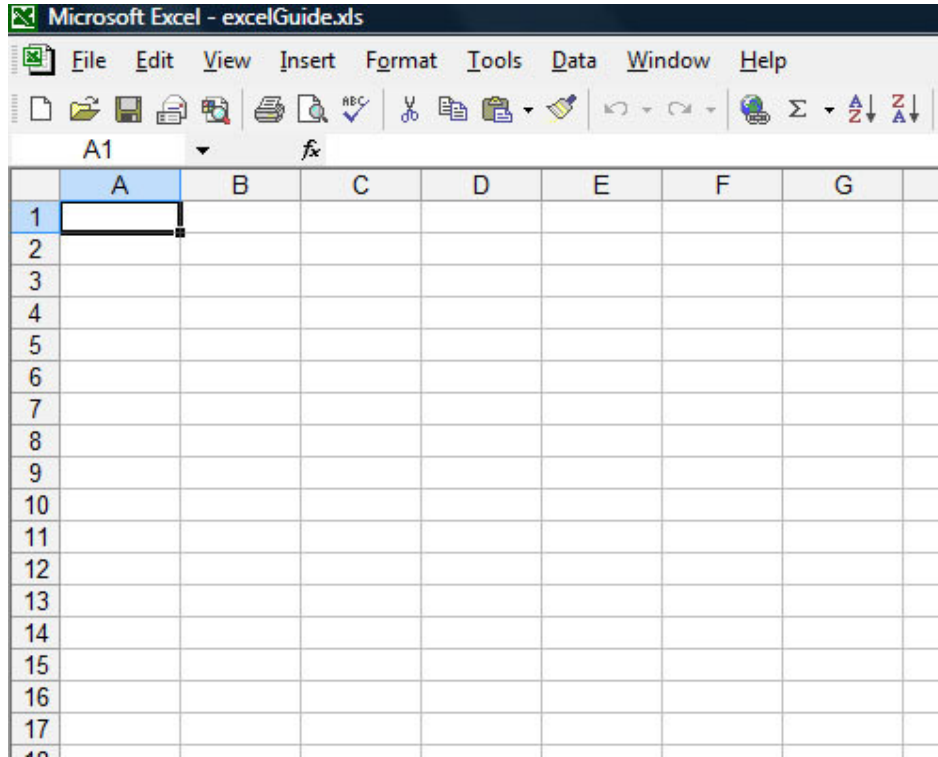
The position is equivalent to a grid reference on a map. It has X and Y co-ordinates, with X running from left to right and Y occupying the vertical axis running top to bottom. So the first cell is in the top left hand corner and the last cell is in the bottom right hand corner.

Map co-ordinates distinguish the North and South axis (the equivalent of the Y axis on the spreadsheet) using the number followed by North (or South). Equally the West and East co-ordinates are distinguished by always being from a common point which is 0 located at Greenwich, but often the direction East is included. So London is GPS North 55°, East 0° (approximately) and Kitale in Kenya is GPS: East 03°01'22.6 North 01°00'00.2".

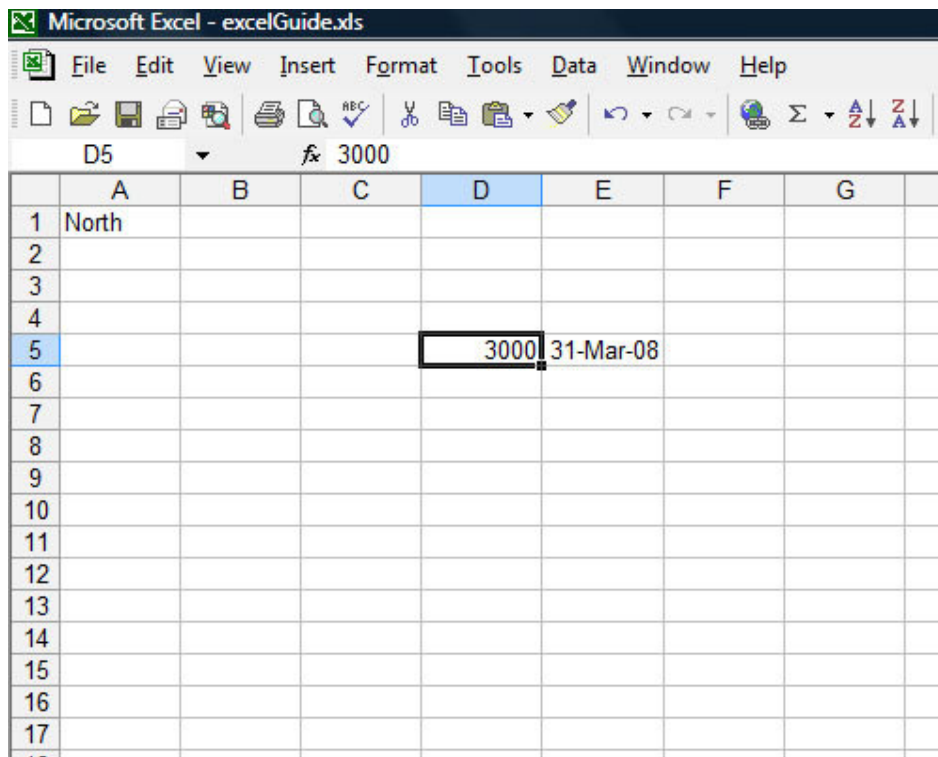
In a spreadsheet the X axis (left to right) uses letters; A, B, C etc and the Y axis (top to bottom) uses numbers; 1, 2, 3 etc. So each cell has a unique position and code that identifies this position. A1, D5, E5 etc. You should be able to find these cells in the spreadsheet. At the moment the cells are empty ie they do not contain any content.

Content is data or information such as text or numbers. But the spreadsheet can do more than simply add-up numbers in columns or rows even if this will be its main function for 99 percent of its life. As above the content can also be a 'date' but it can also be mathematical, scientific or statistical formulae.

Below is a blank or empty spreadsheet, note that the rows and columns are pre-defined; A, B, C, ... AY, AZ and 1, 2, 3, ... 300, 301.



In the following spreadsheet, the cell A1 contains text; North, D5 contains a number; 3000 and E5 contains a date 31-Mar-08.





The content is normally 'General' by default, and Excel assumes that if you enter numbers into a cell eg 3000 then the format of the cell should be 'number'. If you enter text, eg North, Excel will assume the information entered is 'text'. If you enter 31-Mar-08 then Excel will assume the information is a 'date'.

Cell one has a position A1 and contains content with the format text; North
Cell two has a position D5 and contains content with the format number; 3000
Cell three has a position E5 and contains content with the format date; 31-Mar-08

Navigating around Excel

Excel is primarily used to store and process numbers; row of number and columns of numbers. Moving between the cells quickly is important especially when large quantities of data (numbers) are to be entered. In this situation the mouse is the worst method of moving between the cells.

To move horizontally from one cell to the next eg A to B to C use the <tab> key or the <right arrow> key rather than the mouse. To move vertically use either <return> or the <up arrow> or the <down arrow>.

Summary

The tabular boxes that make up the spreadsheet are known as cells. Each cell has a unique identity defined by its position on the X axis (A, B, C etc) and its position in the Y axis (1, 2, 3 etc) to give A1, D5 and E5.

About the author

John Hookham is a director of a website design and marketing services company.