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Back To Basics

Fun with Spreadsheets

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Most people do not associate the word “fun” with anything like what a spreadsheet program can do, but I hope by reading this you will decide to at least open a spreadsheet program just to see what it can do and if it is really “fun” for you to use. I use a spreadsheet program to keep track of my monthly expenses. It is really simple to use for this purpose and helps you organize anything with numbers. Let me introduce you to the basic use of spreadsheets.

What is a “spreadsheet” program anyway? It is a program that allows you to organize numbers in a matrix array of boxes called “cells”. You can put ANY number or words in a “cell”. The beauty of a spreadsheet program is that it can do calculations and is easy to sort or change the contents of any cell. You have probably heard of Microsoft Excel (part of the Microsoft Office set of programs), but there are many other FREE spreadsheet programs that you can use as well, such as Google Drive (called “Sheets”) and Open Office (Google these to find out more about them).

What can a spreadsheet program do for me? I enjoy using a spreadsheet program to help me keep track of my personal home monthly expenses, my investments, and lists of club members. Although a spreadsheet program is intended for use with numbers, you certainly can use it to organize and sort a list of anything. Let me introduce you to a simple basic use of a spreadsheet by using one to track monthly expenses. I will use Excel 2013 in this example.

The basic elements of a spreadsheet. All spreadsheet programs work the same way. Once you learn how to use one, it is not difficult to use another. The basic screen of a spreadsheet (see sample) is an array of cells with the cell columns labeled with letters (A, B, C, etc.) and the cell rows labeled with numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.). Thus every cell has a unique “address” such as B5 or D3 for example. Above this array of cells are the many menus, tools, and options that are available for you.

Use your mouse to click on a “cell” in the array. You will see the “address” of that cell displayed just above the top row in the far left of the menu area. This is how you know what cell you are working with. The box or area to the right of the address is the “function” bar and it shows the contents of the cell here. You can enter and edit the contents of a cell in this area if you want, I find it most helpful.

For our example, I am going to put words in the first row and column cells. This serves to “label” or give a title to the numbers I am going to put into the other cells.

Click the mouse (the left mouse button) in cell A1 and then type in the word "Expense". In the following cells in row 1, click in each cell to enter in the name of the month. So in cell B1, type "January", in cell C1, "February", in cell D1 "March", etc. (see example). In column A, in each row from 2 on down, enter the text of the expense (bill, service, or company) that you pay each month. So, for example, in cell A2 I will enter "Electric", in cell A3 I will enter "Water and Sewer", in cell A4 I will enter "Gas", etc. When I entered "Water and Sewer" the column was too narrow to hold all the words, so I had to widen the column. I did this by positioning my mouse on the vertical line between "A" and "B" (the mouse changes to a double arrow) and then I dragged the mouse to the right. I will end up with a list in column A of all my monthly expenses. All you are doing, really, is making a simple table with labels on the first row and column. This table will be filled with a number (your expense) in each cell.

Note that if you click on a cell to select it, the contents of the cell will appear above the array of cells in the "function" bar.

Enter numbers into the cells. Just click your mouse (left mouse button) on any cell to enter something into that cell. You can enter what you want in that cell by using the function bar if you wish. If you make a mistake, you can delete what is in that cell by hitting the "delete" key on your keyboard or use text editing. I did not use the decimal (the period key on your keyboard) in this example, but you can pick the "two decimal point" option if you want, and the "\$" option as well.

Adding up the total. Now we come to the good part. You would like the spreadsheet to add or sum all the numbers in a column (or row). So, let's enter a new row label in column A as the last row in our spreadsheet and enter the text "TOTAL". In my example spreadsheet there are only three monthly expenses, so my "TOTAL" row will be row 5. You can have as many rows (and expenses) as you like. Now click on cell B5 which will contain my total of all the "January" expenses and I will enter the following FORMULA or FUNCTION into that cell: =SUM(B2:B4). You should enter this formula in the "function bar" at the top, above the spreadsheet, in the menu area. Note that the equal sign "=" indicates that this is NOT text or a number like we entered in our other cells, but a formula or function. We are telling it to ADD or SUM the numbers in all the cells from B2 to B4, and it will put the total in this cell, B6. In my example, you can see the formula that is in cell B5 in the function bar above. I find it easier to always enter things into a cell by entering it in the formula or function bar.

Try doing this in the remaining total cells in row 5, totaling the numbers in each column above.

What's the Big Deal Anyway? Well, the big deal is that you can organize and work with ANY array of numbers OR text. Not only can you total numbers, but you can average them or perform any mathematical calculation you want with them. It is easy to insert new rows or columns and the formulas will still do the calculations correctly. You can sort your spreadsheet by text (the "labels") or by numbers. Your spreadsheet can

look (that is, can be “formatted”) any way you want. You can color or highlight text, numbers, or cells; make the text larger, use any font, make the size of the cells any size you want, and much more. There are hundreds of formatting options and hundreds of “built-in” formulas and functions. Excel, for example, can even draw graphs and charts. Well, I will let the accountants use all the fancy stuff, I just want to track some of my basic expenses, and a spreadsheet is perfect for doing that. Why not give it a try? You can learn more about the spreadsheet that you are using by using the “help” option or by asking Google. YouTube will have many video lessons as well. Hey, maybe this can be fun after all!

