

10 COMMON EXCEL MISTAKES



Download in hi-res: bit.ly/10-excel-mistakes

1 Creating Unintended External Links

Impact: Copying just the formula (not the whole table) from previous month to current month causes Excel to keep a reference to the original workbook, leading to incorrect calculations, update fails, & workbook slowdown.

Before applying the fix: Home > Find & Select > Formulas > Apply a Fill Color. This highlights all cells which have a formula.

Fix: Copy the external file reference > Ctrl + H > Replace external file reference with blank.

Understanding Structured References: <https://bit.ly/tables-abs-structured-references>

Sales Rep	Sales \$	Commission
Anna	15,000	1,500
Bob	20,000	2,000
Claire	9,000	900

Formula: `=10%*[@Sales $]]`

Sales Rep	Sales \$	Commission
Simon	20,000	1,500
Jeff	14,000	2,000
Paul	8,000	900

Formula: `=10%*May_Commissions.xlsx!MayCommission[@[Sales $]]`

Incorrect Calculations: 10% of 20,000 should be 2,000

2 Hardcoding Values Inside Formulas

Impacts:

- Error-prone
- Requires updating every formula
- Inconsistent calculations

Fix: Use input cells to store constant values, then reference them in your formulas.

Use absolute references (like \$C\$5) so the rate stays fixed when copying or dragging the formula.

Absolute vs Relative Cell References: <https://bit.ly/excel-abs-rel-references>

Sales Rep	Sales \$	Commission
Anna	15,000	1,500
Bob	20,000	2,000
Claire	9,000	900

Formula: `=10%*C5`

Commission Rate	10%	
Sales Rep	Sales \$	Commission
Anna	15,000	1,500
Bob	20,000	2,000
Claire	9,000	900

Formula: `=$C$3*C5`

3 Merging Cells Inside Data Tables

Impact: Disrupts formulas, column selection, sorting & filtering

Merged cells prevents easily selecting only the Sales column, leading to incorrect total sales.

Unmerge cells > Select cells > Ctrl+I > Alignment tab > Under Horizontal, choose Center Across Selection

Find all merged cells: CTRL+F > Format > Merge Cells

Center Across Selection: <https://bit.ly/excel-center-across-selection>

Sales Rep	Sales \$	Commission
Anna	50,000	5,000
Bob	40,000	4,000
Claire	20,000	2,000
Total Sales	=SUM(B4:D7)	

Formula: `=SUM(B4:D7)`

Sales Rep	Sales \$	Commission
Anna	50,000	5,000
Bob	40,000	4,000
Claire	20,000	2,000
Total Sales	=SUM(C4:C7)	

Formula: `=SUM(C4:C7)`

4 Not Using Excel Tables

Impact: Manual work to update formulas and high risk of incorrect calculations

Fix: Select your data > Ctrl+T to convert into an Excel Table.

FILTER Masterclass: <https://bit.ly/filter-fn>

Tables Masterclass: <https://bit.ly/tables-excel>

Formula was not auto-updated to include additional data and gave an error.

New data gets auto added to the table, resulting in correct calculations

Region	Sales \$
East	15,000
West	20,000
North	9,000
South	5,000
South Sales	#CALC!

Formula: `=FILTER(C3:C5,B3:B5="South")`

Region	Sales \$
East	15,000
West	20,000
North	9,000
South	5,000
South Sales	5,000

Formula: `=FILTER(Table3[Sales $], Table3[Region]="South")`

5 Not Using Data Validation

Source data contains typos

Typos feed into PivotTable & Chart

Incorrect chart with 4 categories instead of 2

Impacts:

- Inconsistent spelling or accidental typos
- Misleading summaries, charts etc.

Fix: Select the input cells > Data tab > Data Validation > Choose List > Type in list values or reference a range

Data Validation Masterclass: <https://bit.ly/excel-dropdowns>

Category	Amount \$
Travel	1,000
Food	2,000
Traavel	1,500
Foot	1,300

Category	Total Expense \$
Food	2,000
Foot	1,300
Traavel	1,500
Travel	1,000
Grand Total	5,800

Category	Total Expense \$
Food	3,300
Travel	2,500
Grand Total	5,800

Total Expense

Travel 17%, Food 35%, Traavel 26%, Foot 22%

Total Expense

Travel 43%, Food 57%

6 Inserting Extra Spaces to Force Text to Wrap

Inconsistent line breaks when resizing columns

Impacts:

- Inconsistent text alignment
- Wrapping breaks when resizing columns
- Hard to read, copy or print cleanly
- Causes problems writing formulas.

Fix: Use Alt + Enter to create proper line breaks inside a cell.

No impact to line breaks when resizing columns

239 Shortcuts: <https://bit.ly/excel-239-shortcuts>

Product	% Alloc.	Admin
Department	Alloc.	Allocated
Amarilla	30%	36,000
Carretera	25%	30,000
Montana	15%	18,000

Product	% Alloc.	Admin
Department	Alloc.	Allocated
Amarilla	30%	36,000
Carretera	25%	30,000

7 Unintentionally Using the Manual Formulas Mode

How can it happen? Opening a file previously saved in manual mode

Impacts:

- Outdated calculations
- Formulas don't update
- Causes errors or confusion

Fix: Formulas > Calculation Options > Automatic

Pay heed to Microsoft 365's "Your workbook is stale" warning

Formulas > Calculation Options > Enable "Format Stale Values"

Formula Hacks: <https://bit.ly/excel-formula-hacks>

Commission Rate	10%	
Sales Rep	Sales \$	Commission
Anna	15,000	1,500
Bob	20,000	2,000
Claire	9,000	900

Formula: `=$C$3*C5`

Commission Rate	20%	
Sales Rep	Sales \$	Commission
Anna	15,000	1,500
Bob	20,000	2,000
Claire	9,000	900

Formula: `=$C$3*C5`

Incorrect Calculations: 20% of 15,000 should be 3,000

9 Not Trimming Data

Impacts:

- Misleading results
- Incorrect decision-making

Fix: Wrap your data in the TRIM Function

Automate Data Cleaning!

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ENROLL NOW! <https://bit.ly/moth-courses>

Data Cleaning Tips: <https://bit.ly/data-cleaning-10>

Region	Sales \$
East	15,000
West	20,000
South	9,000
South	5,000
South Sales	5,000

Formula: `=SUM(FILTER(C3:C6,B3:B6="South"))`

Region	Sales \$
East	15,000
West	20,000
South	9,000
South	5,000
South Sales	14,000

Formula: `=SUM(FILTER(C3:C6, TRIM(B3:B6)="South"))`

Incorrect total as the region column has hidden spaces

Correct total as the region column has been trimmed

10 Using Incorrect Data Types

Impacts:

- Incorrect calculations
- Inconsistent sorting, filtering & formatting

Fix: Correct the data type e.g., convert numbers or dates formatted as text via Formulas tab > Error Checking or Power Query for repetitive tasks.

Incorrect total as not all values have number data type

Enable suppressed error indicators from Formulas > Error Checking > Reset Ignored Errors

Correct total as all values have number data type

Region	Sales \$
East	15000
West	20000
North	9000
South	5000
Total Sales	40,000

Formula: `=SUM(C3:C6)`

Region	Sales \$
East	15000
West	20000
North	9000
South	5000
Total Sales	49,000

Formula: `=SUM(C3:C6)`

8 Not Using Conditional Formatting

Impacts:

- No formatting leads to missed insights
- Manual formatting can be subjective, inconsistent, and tedious to update.

Fix: Select Data > Home > Conditional Formatting Highlight Cells > A Date Occurring...

Conditional Formatting: <https://bit.ly/cond-format-tricks>

Can lead to missed deadlines

Gives visual cues for overdue, due and not due tasks

Task	Assignee	Due Date
Submit Report	Alice	08-06-25
Pay Invoice	Bob	05-06-25
Client Call	Chloe	22-05-25
Review Plan	David	02-06-25

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