



Sort on More Than Three Columns

ARTICLE DATE: 08.15.07

By Neil Rubenking

Q: When doing a sort in Microsoft Excel, you can sort by up to three columns. What can you do if you want to use more than three? — *Helen Rydzynski*

A: Excel sorts a data range by comparing the rows based on the specified first, second, and third sort columns—at least, pre-Microsoft Office 2007 versions do. The newest version of Excel lets you add as many as 64 levels. When it comes to two or more rows that are exactly the same as far as those three columns go, Excel is supposed to preserve the existing order of those rows. That being the case, you can sort any number of columns in groups of three, starting with the least significant. Suppose you want to sort on A, B, C, D, E, F, and G, in that order. Sort on E, F, and G as the first, second, and third columns. Then sort on B, C, and D as first, second, and third. Finally, just sort on A.

Even though this is the official, Microsoft-sanctioned approach (see the company's Knowledge Base article at support.microsoft.com/kb/268007/en-us), it can be really tedious if you have to do it repeatedly. In many cases a better solution is to build a column specifically for sorting. For example, if you have four columns of whole numbers all under 100, you might build a column for sorting using a formula like this:

$$=((A2*100+B2)*100+C2)*100+D2$$

Now you can instantly sort the data range by selecting this special column and clicking the AZ or ZA button on the toolbar.

Copyright (c) 2007 Ziff Davis Media Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Data Overload

You can sometimes combine many columns into a single sortable column; creative formatting makes data easier to understand.

