

Dealing with Data

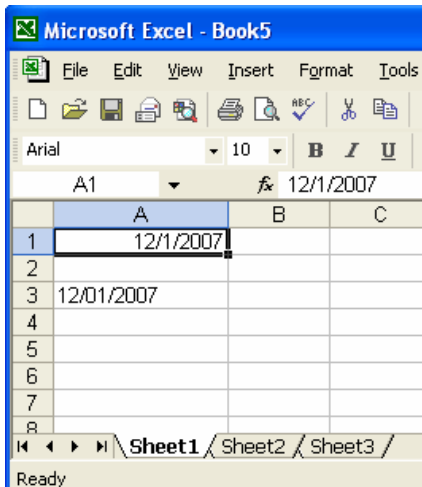
When printing color coded file folder labels, having “clean” data is an essential part of the process. Dealing with databases that contain data with leading zeros or dates can be particularly challenging. One has to know the particulars of how different software deals with the data to ensure the desired results.

One important thing to remember is that what gets displayed is not always what the underlying data looks like. Depending upon the software in use, there can easily be formatting in place that controls how the data gets displayed.

Following are some examples of this and how to best deal with the potential problems it can create.

Dealing with Date Data

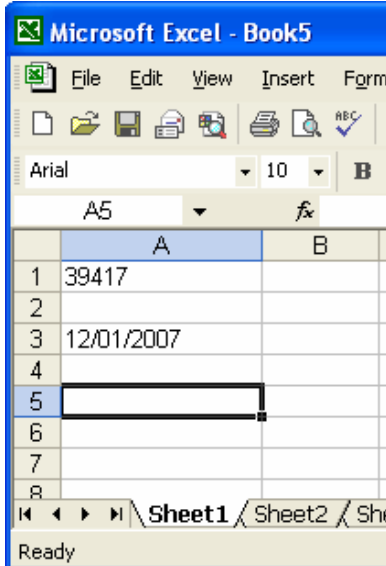
In the following example, date information has been entered in an Excel spreadsheet. Both entries were keyed in the same – 12/01/2007. Cell A1 had no special formatting, but cell A3 was first formatted as a text field.



You will note that A1 dropped the zero in front of the day and the date is right-justified in the cell. These are clues that the cell is using a date formatting. Excel has done this automatically, with no prompting – it has decided that we’ve entered a date and has chosen to format as such.

What’s important to note here is that when Excel chooses the date format, even though it displays much like what was entered, the actual underlying data has been converted to a Julian Date. This means that Excel has converted the date to a sequential number (39417) that indicates the number of days since January 1, 0 A.D. Regardless of how the data has been formatted to appear, the underlying data is 39417.

This can be seen clearly by looking at the second example. This is the same spreadsheet, just that the cells have now been formatted as text. You will note that A3 still appears as it was entered (starting out as text) whereas A1 is now displayed as the Julian Date.



When working with data in either Excel or Access, the best advice is to format all cells or fields as text prior to any data entry. The only reason to use any other format is if you will need to perform some sort of calculation on that field.

The best way to verify what your data really looks like is to save it in a .CSV (comma separated value) file. Excel and Access can both save data files in this format.

The thing to watch out for is that if you have Excel installed on your workstation and you open a .CSV file by clicking on it, Excel will automatically make choices about data format. If it sees data that looks like a date, it will format the field as such. Similarly, if it decides a field is a number, it will use that formatting.

The best way to open a .CSV file is in Notepad. Notepad does not use any formatting, and will display the data as it really exists in the file. If you really want to open the file in Excel, it is best to first open Excel and then import the .CSV file, telling Excel to format all fields as text. This will preserve the data in its actual format.

Dealing with Leading Zeros in Data

Generally speaking, you will not be able to enter numbers that contain leading zeros in either Excel or Access unless you have already formatted the fields or cells as text. If the fields have not been formatted as text, the software will assume that you are entering a value, and it will choose a value format that will drop leading zeros. If you need to perform a calculation or function on this data, then a value format makes sense, however, that format is not always desirable when working with data for labels.

Having a field or cell formatted for text is easy enough. What can get tricky is if you are importing data from another source. Generally files

exported from an enterprise system will be in a universal format such as an ASCII flat text file, what are usually presented as .CSV or .TXT files. These types of files allow for easy transfer of data between different software products because of their lack of application specific formatting. They really contain only data.

The thing to be aware of is that, as noted earlier, double-clicking the file icon will cause these files to be opened in Excel and Excel will make choices about how it thinks the data should be formatted – often not the correct or desirable choices. Once again – it is best to open Excel or Access and then import the data, defining the data fields as text, to see what the data really looks like in its raw format.

Special Formatting

The other thing that bears mentioning here is working with special formatting in Access. As described earlier, generally formatting fields as text will preserve data in a format to your liking. There is however an exception when working in Access.

It is possible to create formatting for fields that are not text fields such that data appears differently than how it is actually stored and exported. An example of this would be creating a special formatting for the Autonumber field. Notice how the Autonumber field appears in the following image.

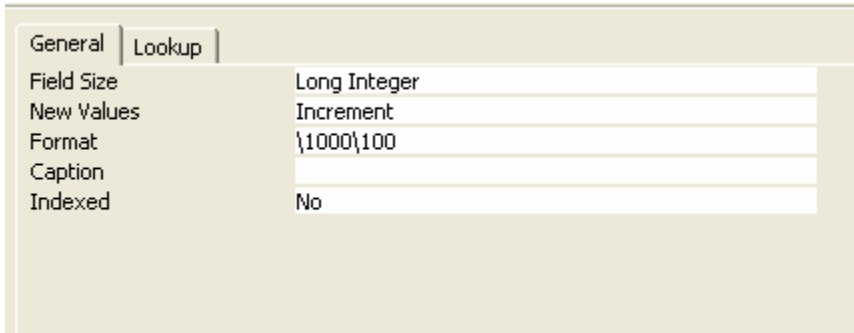
	Control Number	Cell	Sequence	value test	Autonumber
	001	3213	00001	11	1000101
	002	6519	00002	24	1000102
	651	6851	08198	56	1000103
	652	8198	0023	85	1000104
▶				0	(AutoNumber)

If we export the table, the data looks like the following example. Note the final (far right) column.

```

mdbexport.csv - Notepad
File Edit Format View Help
"001","3213","00001",11,1
"002","6519","00002",24,2
"651","6851","08198",56,3
"652","8198","0023",85,4
  
```

This is because in the table design the Autonumber field has been specially formatted to appear as a specific character sequence (even though the underlying data is really only one digit). Notice the special formatting characters in the format field in the example below.



If we want the Autonumber field to appear with this special formatting in our label print job, we must create a query that will include the special formatting and then export the results of that query. Then the data will be properly formatted. Notice the use of the format command in the following query design.

