HOW TO...
Use a spreadsheet

Spreadsheets make office life much easier, but they can be daunting for inexperienced users. Lynley Oram gets you started

It is difficult to remember now just how much harder life was in an office before computers and spreadsheet programs came along. Just 20 years ago, everything had to be done by hand in huge ledgers.

Then along came the digital revolution, with spreadsheet programs to take the drudgery out of compiling data. Even those who have no need or desire to keep accounts use one, often to keep a record of a CD collection or as an easy way to compile a weekly shopping list.

While spreadsheets are now ubiquitous, they are still far from user-friendly. Trying to follow even the simplest guide to doing a task can prove immensely difficult given the amount of technical terms and jargon used in spreadsheets. Here we give you a handy guide to all the basics you need to know when using a spreadsheet. We've used Excel for this, as it is the most common spreadsheet program, but you will find that all spreadsheets work in a similar way at this level.

1 When you first start the spreadsheet program, it will automatically open with a blank grid of squares. This is the workbook. By default, Excel opens a workbook with three worksheets in it. Each worksheet has a tab at the bottom left-hand corner of the screen. If you use only one sheet, the other two are just taking up

space and can be removed. One way to do this is to right-click on the tab of a worksheet you don't need and select Delete.

Another handy feature in this right-click menu is Rename. Select this to give a tab that you are using a meaningful name. If you've a lot of sheets in your workbook, this will make it much easier to navigate between them.

2 If you habitually use only one worksheet, or two or four, you may find it useful to change the default setting so that all new workbooks are in your preferred format. From the Tools menu select Options. Click on the General tab to bring it to the front. Change the number in the box next to Sheets in new workbook. While you are in there, you might want to change the user name. This is the name that will appear whenever you insert a comment, for instance, in a shared worksheet. If it doesn't have your name — it might be blank, have the name of your computer or a previous user — highlight the text and hit the backspace key. Then enter your name. Click OK.

3 If you find later that you need an additional sheet in your workbook, right-click on the tab of one of the existing sheets and select Insert. In the Insert dialog box make sure the Worksheet icon is selected (it will be

highlighted in blue) and click OK. The new sheet will automatically be placed in front of the worksheet you right-clicked on. If you want to move it, right-click on the tab of the new sheet and select Move or Copy. In the dialog box that appears, either click on Move to End or select the worksheet in front of which you want this sheet to be placed. Use this technique to re-order any of your worksheets.

4 There are some basic but useful formatting shortcuts to know. For example, say you have some cells where the contents don't fit inside the cell but spill out over the next blank cell or aren't visible at all. In the screenshot for this step you can see that the cells at the top of columns A and B both contain content that doesn't fit. There are two quick ways to remedy this. First, if you want to resize all the cells in the spreadsheet to fit their contents, click on the blank header in the top left-hand corner of the worksheet (an arrow points to it in the screenshot). This highlights the entire sheet. Next move the cursor over the line between the header for Column
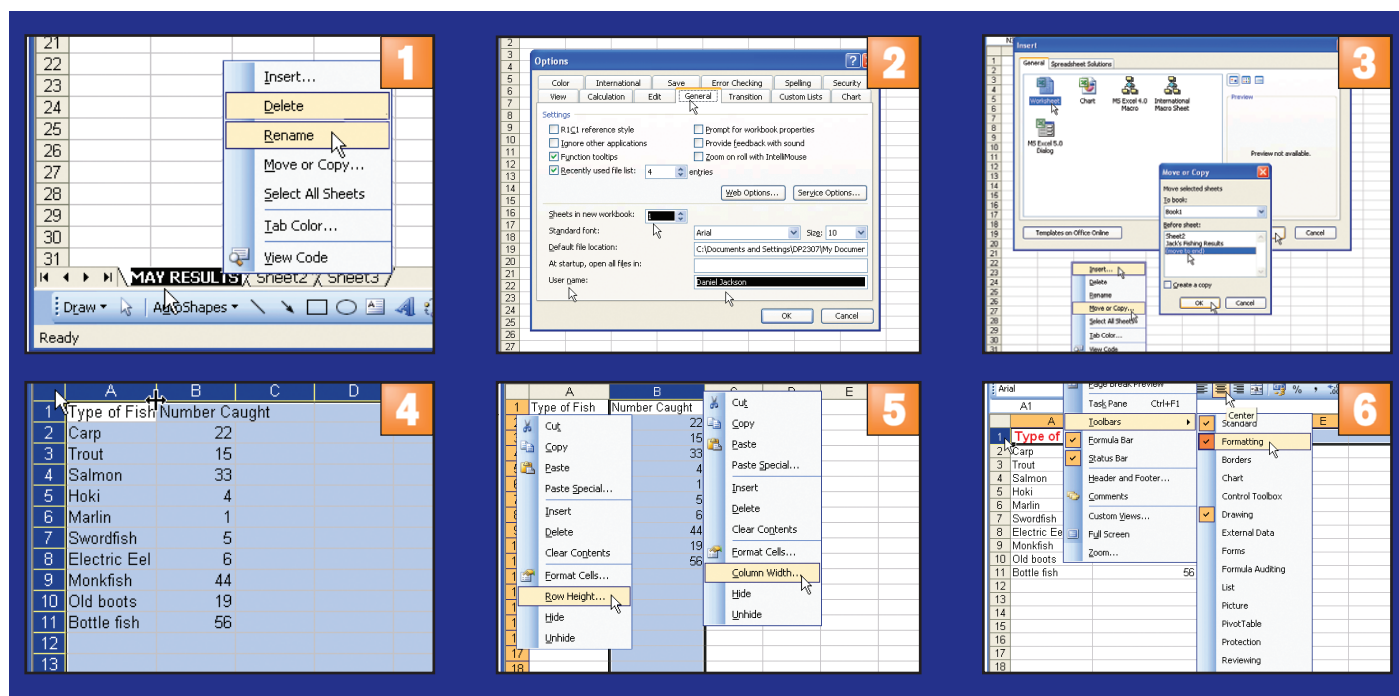
A and the header for Column B. It will turn into a bar with a double-headed arrow. When it does, double-click. You can use the same method to resize rows as well.

5 You may want to resize just a single column or a single row. In this case, don't highlight the entire sheet. Just place the cursor to the right of the column or below the row header and double-click when it turns into a double-headed arrow. If you want to specify a certain column or row size, click and drag inwards or outwards when the cursor changes into the double-headed arrow. For the greatest precision, right-click on the column or row header and select Column Width or Row Height. Enter a size in the dialog box that appears.

6 Now that we've got our cells the correct size, it's time to make our spreadsheet more presentable and easier to read. We'll start with the headings for our data. Highlight the entire row by clicking on the number 1 tile to the right of it. Alternatively you can highlight specific cells by clicking in the first one and dragging the cursor across the row. Use the formatting buttons on the toolbar at the top of the screen for simple effects, such as making the text bold, changing its colour or putting it in the centre of the cell. If the Formatting toolbar isn't visible, go to the View menu, select Toolbars and make sure there is a tick next to Formatting by clicking on it.

7 Our data needs an additional title at the top of the page. The quickest way to do this is to insert a new row. Right-click on the Row 1 header, as you did when resizing, and this time select Insert. A new row will appear directly above the row you right-clicked on, with all content in the rows below moved down one. In other words, what was in Row 1 previously is now in Row 2. For the full range of formatting options, it is best to use the Format Cells dialog box. To open this, highlight the cells to which you want to apply identical formatting, right-click on them and select Format

Cells from the pop-up menu. You can open the same dialog box by clicking on the Format menu and selecting Cells.

8 We've changed the heading so that the text is now bigger and in bold. To resize text, select the cell, then click on the drop-down menu in the Formatting toolbar. The new heading doesn't fit inside the cell, but we don't want to have to resize the whole column. Since there won't be anything else in that row, the best option is to merge a number of cells together to make one large one. Highlight all the cells you want to merge together. Open the Format Cells dialog box and click on the Alignment tab. Under Text Control, tick the box next to Merge Cells. Click OK.

9 Our two headings have been altered and are now too big to fit in their cells. We don't want to make the columns any wider though. Highlight the relevant cells and open the Format Cells dialog box. Go to the Alignment tab and this time tick the box next to Wrap Text in the Text Control section. Click OK. This puts the text over as many lines as necessary and resizes the row so that all the text is visible but the width of the column is unchanged. There are a number of other options on this tab that may come in useful. For example, use the Vertical drop-down menu to align text with the bottom, top or centre of a cell. This tidies things up if text is on a single line, but text in another cell in the same row has been wrapped, making the row taller.

10 Next we're going to add a border to the main body of the data. With the relevant cells highlighted, open the Format Cells dialog box and click on the Border tab. From the Line section on the right-hand side, select a style and a colour you like. To apply the same line style to all the lines in the grid, simply click on the Outline and Inside buttons under Presets at the top of the box. Here we want to do two different styles. We're going to apply a grey dotted line just to the inside of the grid. Select that, then click on the

Inside Vertical button, and then on the Inside Horizontal button. Check you've clicked the correct buttons in the preview box. The next line style we select is a plain, thin black line that will go around the outside square of the grid only. Select the style of line you want, then click on the Outline button. Click OK.

11 In this example, our spreadsheet contains dates but the formatting of the dates varies. We'd like, no matter how the date is entered, to have it displayed as day, month and year, with the month spelled out. Highlight the column and open the Format Cells dialog box. Click on the Number tab and select Date in the Category menu on the left. From the menu that appears on the right, select your preferred date format. Click OK. In our example, some of the cells were filled with crosshatches. In Excel, this indicates that the cell's contents are too wide to be displayed. To get rid of them, adjust the column width.

12 There are two tools in Excel that you will find indispensable once you start using them: the Format Painter and the Fill Handle. The Format Painter is found on the Formatting toolbar; its icon looks like a paintbrush. Use this to transfer the formatting in one cell to another cell quickly. Click on the formatted cell, then on the Format Painter button, and finally on the cell you want to format. Excel will do all the work for you.

The Fill Handle is the small solid square found in the bottom right-hand corner of a selected cell. Click on this and drag it out. When you let go of the mouse button the contents of the selected cell will be copied to all the cells that you dragged the cursor over. It can also be used to copy sequences such as numbers or days of the week. Enter details in at least two cells, then highlight both cells. When multiple cells are highlighted, the Fill Handle will appear only in the very bottom right-hand corner of the last cell. Click on it and drag down the column or across the row and let go. Excel will automatically finish the series for you. ⬛