

How to Remove Date Formatting in Microsoft Excel: A Step-by-Step Guide

Authored by
Mohammed loot

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The Core Concept: Why Dates Appear as Text

In the sphere of professional [Microsoft Excel](#) operations, data analysts frequently encounter the challenge of managing inconsistent or visually confusing date representations. While Excel is engineered to automatically detect and apply a user-friendly [date format](#) to numerical inputs, many advanced scenarios require that the underlying, fundamental value of the date be exposed. This raw numerical data is often necessary for complex calculations, troubleshooting, or integrating datasets into external systems that cannot parse stylized date strings.

It is essential to understand that when a cell displays a date, such as "12/31/2023," it is not stored as a simple text string. Instead, Excel maintains an integer known as a serial number, which represents the precise number of days that have elapsed since a specific reference point. The aesthetically pleasing date format visible in the spreadsheet is merely a visual layer applied on top of this integer. Consequently, removing this display format does not delete or corrupt the data; it simply reverts the cell's appearance to display the crucial underlying number.

Mastering the ability to strip away the visual formatting and reveal the serial number is a cornerstone of effective data manipulation. This technique is particularly vital when reconciling data from disparate sources, ensuring that time-based calculations remain accurate, and guaranteeing that the data is ready for rigorous analysis. This comprehensive guide details the two most efficient, non-formulaic methods for achieving this conversion, returning your dates to their fundamental numerical state.

Preparing Data: When and Why Formatting Must Be Stripped

The necessity of removing date formatting usually arises when working with large datasets where data integrity is paramount. For instance, data imported from legacy systems, external databases, or varying regional settings often carries proprietary or inconsistent formatting that must be standardized before any analytical work can begin. To perform accurate time-series analysis, cohort calculations, or simple date subtraction, the numerical equivalent--the serial date--is mandatory.

Consider the common scenario illustrated below. We have a column containing standard, readable date entries. For specific computational purposes, perhaps calculating precise day differences across massive ranges, we need to convert these visual dates into their raw, unformatted numeric serial numbers.

	A	B	C	D	E
1	Date				
2	1/1/2023			44927	
3	5/14/2023			45060	
4	6/17/2023			45094	
5	7/1/2023	Remove date format		45108	
6	8/15/2023			45153	
7	9/27/2023			45196	
8	10/3/2023			45202	
9	12/20/2023			45280	
10	12/24/2023			45284	
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					

Our objective is straightforward: to transform these aesthetically formatted dates back into the integers that [Excel](#) uses internally. Fortunately, Excel provides built-in tools that facilitate this conversion instantly, removing the need for complex formulas like `VALUE()` or the creation of intermediate helper columns, thereby streamlining the data cleaning process significantly.

We will explore two distinct, highly effective techniques using the sample data set shown below, covering cells A2 through A10:

Method 1: Clear Formats. This is the most comprehensive method, designed for a complete reset of all cell styling.

Method 2: General Format. This is a more targeted approach, changing only the number format type while preserving other aesthetic properties.

We will use the following range to meticulously demonstrate both procedures, ensuring the final result is the desired raw serial date value:

	A	B	C	D	E
1	Date				
2	1/1/2023				
3	5/14/2023				
4	6/17/2023				
5	7/1/2023				
6	8/15/2023				
7	9/27/2023				
8	10/3/2023				
9	12/20/2023				
10	12/24/2023				
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					
16					

Method 1: Aggressive Reset Using the Clear Formats Function

The **Clear Formats** feature offers the quickest and most thorough way to remove any and all styling applied to a cell or range. When applied, this function executes a deep visual reset, stripping away the [date format](#) along with any bolding, italicization, font colors, background fills, or cell borders. If the goal is a total visual purification of the data while ensuring the integrity of the underlying value remains, this method is superior due to its speed and breadth.

To successfully implement the **Clear Formats** feature and instantly expose the numerical serial numbers hidden behind your dates, follow this precise sequence of steps:

Identify and Select the Data Range: Begin by precisely highlighting the target cells. In our running example, this range is **A2:A10**, which contains the dates requiring unformatting.

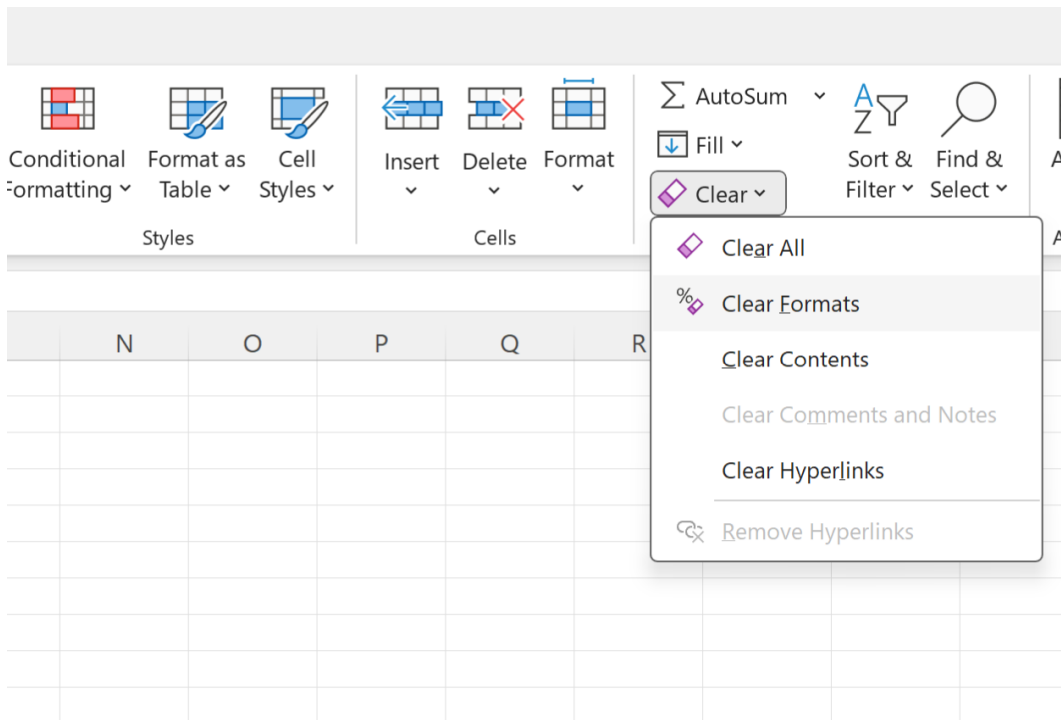
Access the Home Tab: Navigate to the [Home tab](#), which is the primary control center on the Excel ribbon and contains all fundamental editing and formatting tools.

Locate the Editing Group: Move to the far right side of the [Home tab](#) to find the **Editing group**. Within this group, click on the **Clear** icon, which is typically represented by an eraser graphic.

Execute Clear Formats: A list of cleaning options will drop down. Select the option labeled **Clear Formats**. This command instructs Excel to eliminate all styling information, including the specific

date structure, leaving the content in its rawest numerical state.

The immediate result of this action is the transformation of the visually formatted dates into large integers, as shown in the updated spreadsheet view:



The transformation is instantaneous. The cells are now displaying the internal data points--the serial numbers--which are the true values used by the Excel calculation engine.

	A	B	C	D	E
1	Date				
2	44927				
3	45060				
4	45094				
5	45108				
6	45153				
7	45196				
8	45202				
9	45280				
10	45284				
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					
16					

Deconstructing the Serial Date System (Crucial Data Integrity)

The integers revealed by removing the visual format are not arbitrary numbers but are the core values utilized by the [Microsoft Excel](#) time-keeping mechanism, known formally as the **Excel Serial Date System**. A comprehensive understanding of this system is critical for anyone involved in complex data handling or financial modeling involving time series. Excel bases all date calculations on the concept of sequential serial numbers, starting with Day 1.

In the standard date system used by Windows versions of Excel, the counter begins on [January 1, 1900](#), which is assigned the serial value of 1. Consequently, when you observe a large number like 44,927 in a cell that previously held a date, it means that exactly 44,927 days have passed since that epoch date of [January 1, 1900](#). This numerical foundation is what enables Excel to perform accurate mathematical operations, such as summing days, calculating work periods, or finding the difference between two events.

Storing dates as serial numbers is a powerful mechanism because it treats dates just like any other numerical data type. Without this system, calculating, for example, the number of business days between "1/1/2023" and "1/1/2024" would require extremely complex string manipulation and logical checks. By using serial numbers, Excel simplifies this to a basic subtraction problem (Serial Date B - Serial Date A).

To demonstrate this precise conversion and solidify the understanding of these raw data points,

consider the direct mappings from our example dataset:

The date 1/1/2023 is internally stored as the serial number **44,927** (representing 44,927 days elapsed since 1/1/1900).

The date 5/14/2023 is internally stored as the serial number **45,060** (representing 45,060 days elapsed since 1/1/1900).

The date 6/17/2023 is internally stored as the serial number **45,094** (representing 45,094 days elapsed since 1/1/1900).

By removing the visible [date format](#), we are confirming the underlying integrity of the data and preparing it for seamless integration into formulas and analytical tools.

Method 2: Targeted Reversion via the General Format

While Method 1 provides a comprehensive reset, its primary drawback is its aggressiveness: it wipes out all visual styling. If your cells include essential aesthetic elements--such as custom borders, specific font colors used for conditional analysis, or bolding--that you must preserve, the **General Format** method is the preferred solution. This technique is specifically designed to target only the number format applied to the cell, leaving all other visual attributes untouched.

The **General Format** represents the default number setting in Excel. When a cell is formatted as General, Excel knows there is no specific formatting rule (like Date, Currency, or Percentage) applied to the cell content. Consequently, when you apply General format to a cell containing a date, Excel drops the customized [date format](#) and automatically defaults to displaying the underlying numerical serial value.

To utilize the conservative **General Format** conversion, follow these steps precisely:

Select the Range: As before, highlight the cell range **A2:A10**, which contains the dates designated for reformatting.

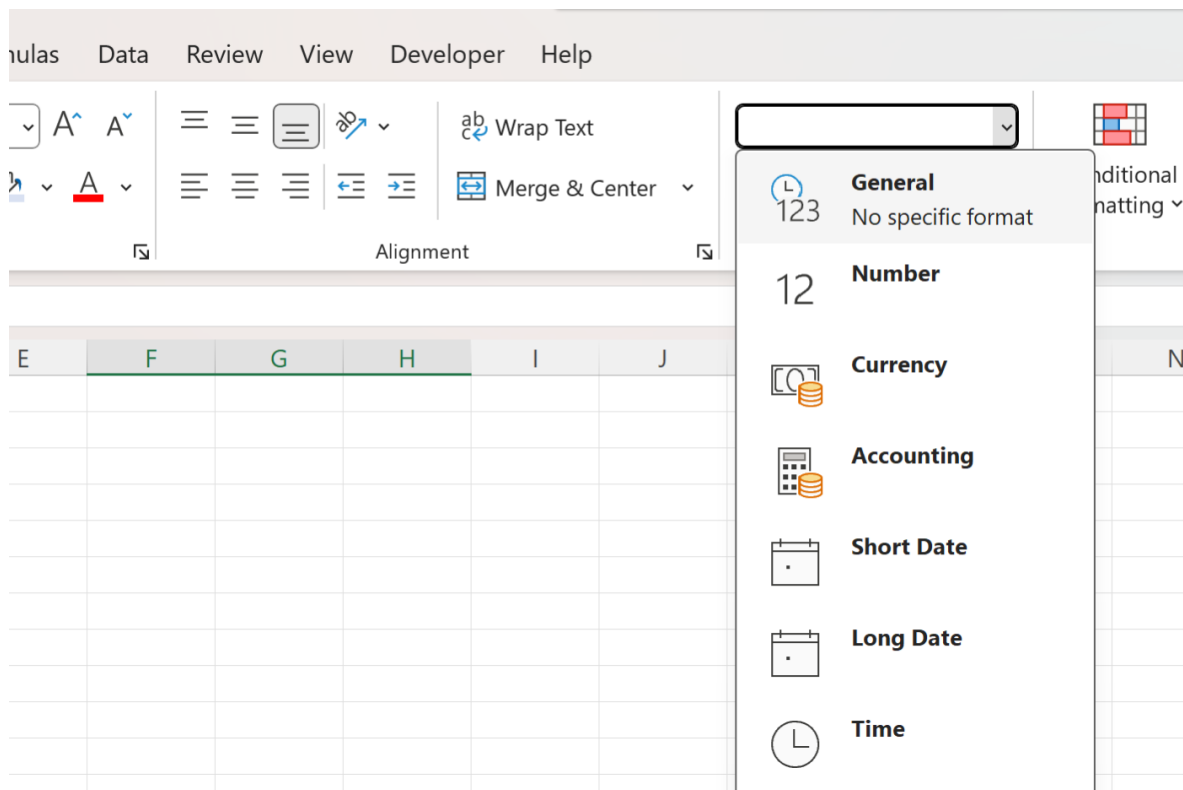
Access the Home Tab: Ensure you are viewing the [Home tab](#) on the Excel ribbon to access the formatting options.

Use the Number Format Dropdown: Locate the **Number group** on the Home tab. Within this group, find the dropdown menu that currently displays the applied format (e.g., "Short Date," "Custom," or "Date").

Select General: Click the dropdown arrow and select **General** from the list of available formats. This instantly reverts the number type to the default, non-specific setting.

The selection process for applying General Format within the ribbon interface is visually

represented here:



Upon selecting **General**, the cells immediately abandon their date representation and display the precise numerical serial date values:

	A	B	C	D	E
1	Date				
2	44927				
3	45060				
4	45094				
5	45108				
6	45153				
7	45196				
8	45202				
9	45280				
10	45284				
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					
16					

Critically, this method yields the mathematically identical numerical result as the **Clear Formats** feature. The choice between the two techniques, therefore, hinges entirely on whether you need to retain or discard aesthetic formatting elements within the selected cell range.

Conclusion: Choosing the Right Technique for Data Preparation

The ability to effectively manage and remove the visual [date format](#) in [Microsoft Excel](#) is an essential skill for ensuring data accuracy and preparing spreadsheets for complex computational tasks. Both the **Clear Formats** and **General Format** methods efficiently expose the underlying serial date value, but they serve distinct purposes regarding cell appearance.

To summarize the decision matrix for choosing the appropriate method:

Utilize **Clear Formats** when the primary requirement is a sweeping, comprehensive reset that removes all visual characteristics--including borders, colors, and formatting--in addition to the date format. This is ideal for quickly purifying data copied from external sources.

Utilize **General Format** when the specific goal is to revert the numerical display back to the default serial number while scrupulously preserving all non-numeric aesthetic features, such as background fills or conditional formatting colors.

In all instances, successfully removing the date formatting reinforces the foundational principle of Excel: that dates are stored internally as serial numbers representing the days elapsed since the epoch date of [January 1, 1900](#). Mastering this straightforward yet fundamental technique ensures

your datasets are always optimized for accurate time-based calculations and seamless data exchange.

Additional Resources

For continued proficiency in data management and advanced formatting within [Microsoft Excel](#), the following resources provide further tutorials on related operations: