Flash Fill in Excel 2013

By Nate Moore, CPA, MBA, CMPE

If you have ever found some of Excel's complex functions and formulas intimidating or time-consuming to implement, this column is for you. One of the powerful new features in Excel 2013, Flash Fill, can recognize patterns in data and extract interesting information for you without writing any formulas. All you need to do is show Excel what you are looking for, and Flash Fill takes care of the rest.

How to Use Flash Fill

Figure 1 shows a sample list of patient names that might have been extracted from a billing system. To use Flash Fill, simply start typing the data you want extracted from each row in the previous column. In Figure 2, the patient's last name was typed in the column next to the patient names. As soon as a few patient last names were entered, Excel recognized the pattern and proposed the last name for the rest of the patients, as shown in gray in Figure 2. To accept Excel's suggestions, simply press enter.

After pressing enter, Excel displays the "Flash Fill Options" button. Clicking the button shows the menu shown in Figure 3. The "Flash Fill Options" menu makes it easy to undo the proposed changes or to select all of the changed cells. If you are looking for Flash Fill in the ribbon, you can find it under the "Fill" menu on the "Home" tab as shown in Figure 4 or under the "Data" tab as shown in Figure 5.

For comparison, extracting the last name from this column can be accomplished with the following formula (assuming all patients have a middle initial and the full name is stored in cell L4): =RIGHT(L4,LEN(L4)-FIND(".",L4)-1)

Simply giving Excel a few examples by typing in last names is much faster than generating a formula like that!

What Flash Fill Can Do

Flash Fill can extract all kinds of interesting information from adjacent columns. For example, in Figure 6, Excel has extracted the day from each of the dates in the previous column. In Figure 7, Excel has extracted two numbers from the pipe-delimited data (the data are separated by the vertical bar/pipe symbol). Remember that Flash Fill only works by entering example data in the column adjacent to the data. The trick in Figure 7 is that, after extracting the middle number (580, 611, 78, etc.), I inserted a new column next to the data. I entered 22, 12, and 52 in the new column to extract the number at the end of the pipe-delimited data.

Flash Fill can do more than extract data: it can also easily add data to cell ranges. The data in Figure 8 was originally exported as a nine-digit number. In the column to the right, I added two hyphens to format the data as a Social Security number. Flash Fill followed that example and formatted the remaining columns in the same way. Flash Fill can also format phone numbers as shown in Figure 9. Both of these examples would involve a long formula to accomplish what Flash Fill can recognize in seconds.

The best way to see what Flash Fill can do is to try it. Find a column of data that you need to extract data from or add data to and give Excel some examples in an adjacent column. Even though the examples in this article have been immediately to the right of the data, Flash Fill also works with examples immediately to the left of the data as well.

Flash Fill works in adjacent columns, but not in adjacent rows. If you need Flash Fill to work in data stored in rows, copy the data and use the "Paste Special Transpose" function as shown in Figure 10 to transform the row into a column. Once the data is in a column, use Flash Fill. If you need the data back as rows, copy the data again and use the Paste Special Transpose function to get the data back in rows.

If you would like to see Flash Fill in action, watch Excel Video 373 at www.mooresolutionsinc.com. Remember that Flash Fill is new in Excel 2013. ∎

Nate Moore, CPA, MBA, FACMPE, writes custom SQL Server code to connect practice management data to Excel for data mining with practices throughout America. Nate's first book, Better Data, Better Decisions: Using Business Intelligence in the Medical Practice*, was just published by MGMA. His free Excel Videos have been viewed more than 600,000 times and are available at mooresolutionsinc.com. Like PivotTableGuy on Facebook or follow PivotTableGuy on Twitter to be notified each time a new Excel Video is released.*

FIGURE 1

Luke W. Townsend
Dennis P. Watson
Jerome P. Hammond
Phillip U. Maxwell
Oliver K. Sparks
Paul K. Johnston
Milton K. Cortez
Lorenzo N. Hunter
Domingo N. Moore
Gordon Z. Stevenson
Kerry Y. Wagner
Cory P. Joseph
Garry Z. Bradley
Dwight J. Perkins
Frederick Y. Schwartz
Samuel K. Murphy

FIGURE 2

Luke W. Townsend	Townsend
Dennis P. Watson	Watson
Jerome P. Hammond	Hammond
Phillip U. Maxwell	Maxwell
Oliver K. Sparks	Sparks
Paul K. Johnston	Johnston
Milton K. Cortez	Cortez
Lorenzo N. Hunter	Hunter
Domingo N. Moore	Moore
Gordon Z. Stevenson	Stevenson
Kerry Y. Wagner	Wagner
Cory P. Joseph	Joseph
Garry Z. Bradley	Bradley
Dwight J. Perkins	Perkins
Frederick Y. Schwartz	Schwartz
Samuel K. Murphy	Murphy

FIGURE 3

Watson	
Hammond	
Maxwell	
Sparks	
Johnston	
Cortez	
Hunter	

↩ Undo Flash Fill
✓ Accept suggestions
Select all 0 blank cells
Select all 22 changed cells

FIGURE 4

⬇ Fill ▾
Z U ■ ■
Sort & Find &
⬇ Down
➡ Right
⬆ Up
⬅ Left
Across Worksheets…
Series…
Justify
Flash Fill

FIGURE 5

DATA   REVIEW   VIEW   POWERPIVOT   DATA MININ

ions
A↓Z
Z↓A
Sort
Filter
Clear
Reapply
Advanced
Text to Columns
Flash Fill
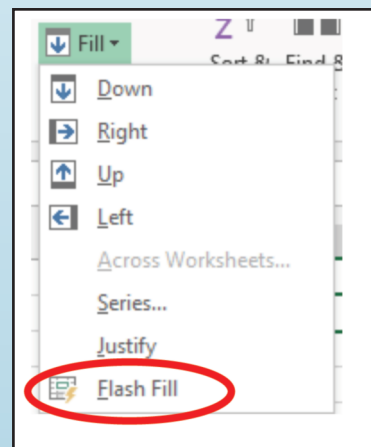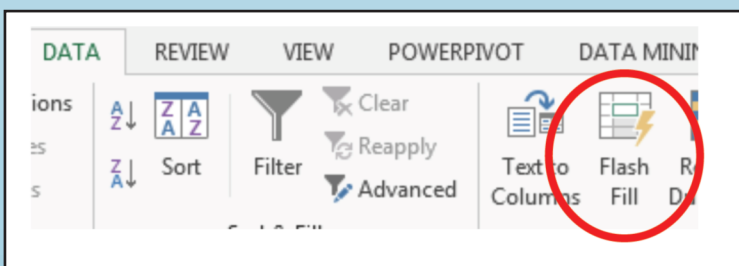
FIGURE 6

7/17/2013	17
7/27/2013	27
7/14/2013	14
7/10/2013	10
8/2/2013	2
8/2/2013	2
7/18/2013	18
7/22/2013	22
7/20/2013	20
7/11/2013	11
7/8/2013	8
7/29/2013	29
7/22/2013	22
7/7/2013	7

FIGURE 7

96|580|22	22	580
52|611|12	12	611
8|78|52	52	78
4|4|17	17	4
50|829|38	38	829
64|159|87	87	159
48|560|93	93	560
3|133|76	76	133
71|251|57	57	251
40|112|16	16	112
37|301|89	89	301
18|657|13	13	657
13|75|24	24	75
20|703|15	15	703
76|9|94	94	9
20|819|67	67	819
21|719|7	7	719

FIGURE 8

776722470	776-72-2470
332699265	332-69-9265
326385654	326-38-5654
765174942	765-17-4942
108853744	108-85-3744
112735637	112-73-5637
689378979	689-37-8979
253905248	253-90-5248
909469147	909-46-9147
680142581	680-14-2581
262557082	262-55-7082
464452625	464-45-2625
658775848	658-77-5848
319519719	319-51-9719
775704014	775-70-4014

FIGURE 9

3356647779	(335) 664-7779
8027360112	(802) 736-0112
6817268214	(681) 726-8214
4311225309	(431) 122-5309
2791893609	(279) 189-3609
2194068214	(219) 406-8214
4199034145	(419) 903-4145
4348477950	(434) 847-7950
4927856063	(492) 785-6063
7692132701	(769) 213-2701
6714423709	(671) 442-3709
7323649532	(732) 364-9532
1731448833	(173) 144-8833
5104947877	(510) 494-7877

FIGURE 10