

Excel For Algebra

Excel 2007 Versus OpenOffice Calc

It is an unpleasant fact of life that Excel costs money. In exchange for this, you get a fairly stable well tested product with a huge user base that includes most companies you might ever get employed by. But still, when you're a student, even the student version may cost more than you're able or willing to pay.

If so, you might prefer to use OpenOffice (<http://www.openoffice.org/>). OpenOffice is a zero-cost open-source substitute for Microsoft Office. Its "Calc" module is pretty much compatible with Excel for the kinds of work we do in Math 101.

However, some common functions in Excel are missing or hard to find in OpenOffice.

Here are some tips and work-arounds, as of Calc version 3.0.0 on Microsoft Windows:

- Use Shift-F4 to insert \$ signs in formulas. Plain old F4 does not work in OpenOffice.
- Ctrl-grave does not work. To show formulas, go to Tools > Options > OpenOffice.org Calc > View, and put a checkmark in Display > Formulas. Formulas will display as ### if the column is too narrow. To show values again, repeat the process but remove the checkmark. (This deficiency is fixed in OpenOffice version 3.2.1.)
- To print formulas takes even more steps. First you must show formulas, using the procedure described above. Then you have to screen-grab an image of the Open Office window, and print the image. (Printing directly from Open Office always prints values, even if formulas are showing.) To screen-grab and print under Windows, do this: 1) Resize the window to fit tightly around your spreadsheet; 2) press Alt-Print Screen to grab an image of the window to the clipboard. Launch the Paint program (probably in All Programs > Accessories), do an Edit > Paste, then print from Paint.
- There is no Formula Auditing toolbar. To draw arrows, go to Tools > Detective and select Trace Dependents or Trace Precedents. There are also keyboard shortcuts for these, like Shift-F5 and Shift-F7. But be careful not to press the keys more times than you need to, because Open Office can hang up for a long time (minutes) if you do.
- The standard Solver in Open Office is developmentally impaired. It only does "linear" systems, which is a serious limitation. You can download a better Solver from <http://extensions.services.openoffice.org/project/NLPSolver> .