

Tools of the Trade:

The Infinite Use of Spreadsheets

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*Organizing is what you do before you do something, so
that when you do it, it is not all mixed up.*

AA Milne

Prior to changing careers at forty, I taught college English and had very little reason to contemplate the infinite uses of spreadsheets. Having suffered through a semester of “Introduction to Accounting” to avoid taking college calculus as an undergrad, I associated spreadsheets with the green column paper that littered my living room floor for a semester. In my second round of graduate school, I was introduced to the joys of Excel in conjunction with a few courses in GIS and two long semesters of statistical analysis. The spreadsheet programs, Excel on the university computers and Appleworks on my home computer, were designed for number crunching. It wasn't until I started writing a rather long thesis on the takings clause and the rise of conservative legal foundations that I realize that the real power of spreadsheet programs had absolutely nothing to do with numbers or statistics and everything to do with collecting and organizing information. In short, in addition to performing all of the math functions required of planners, they make excellent filing cabinets and take up far less space than the heavy military surplus cabinets that line the walls of our publication office.

Examples:

[Creating a Project File](#)

[Defining the Process: Using the “J Questions” to fill in the blanks.](#)

[Building a Gantt Chart/ Timeframe](#)

In many respects, the spreadsheet effectively replaced hypercards, the standby information organizing tool found on early Macs and have all but eliminated the need for expensive data crunching programs like SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), at least for planners and citizens who use, almost exclusively, descriptive statistics.

To start with, it is important to remember that single cells provide a nearly infinite amount of space. Although I have never tested the theory, I have always assumed that you could type James Joyce's *The Dubliners* into a cell and still have enough space to crunch all of the data for your jurisdiction. According to the resident number cruncher, there is a limit to the number of characters, but I have yet to find it.

The introduction of the databook approach, using individual sheets within a single file, has made spreadsheet programs ideal for creating project books, data books, and other information collections. In addition, the flexibility of spreadsheet programs allows users to create internal links between sheets and between sections on the same sheet.

Rather than writing about how to use spreadsheet programs, I've created three separate spreadsheet examples, examples which illustrate both how to use your spreadsheet program in rather non-traditional fashion, and how to design a planning process using “J” (journalism) questions; how to create a Gantt chart; and how to set up a project file. Click on the links in the left hand column to get started.

One final caveat: I chose this approach so that you do not have to recreate the wheel. The files are in Excel (xls) format. Feel free to download the examples, erase the material in the “non-header” cells and fill in your own information. As a former boss of mine said “when in doubt and it looks like it might work, swipe.”