



Learning Generative AI Tools for Excel

Speed Up Your Everyday Tasks with
Microsoft Excel, Copilot, ChatGPT

Companion Book

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Exercise 3.1

Generating an Excel Template for a Book Catalog

Based on Chapter 3, Exercise 1 of the parent book (page 56).

Objective. Use ChatGPT to generate a structured Excel template from a clear specification.

Exercise Statement

Write prompts for ChatGPT to generate the table in Figure 1-1. The table represents a book catalog with the columns Title, Author, Publisher, Year, and ISBN. Format the ISBN field as XXX-X-XXXXX-XXX-X. Below the table (outside it), add a Total Books cell that counts all the books currently entered. Apply a clean visual style: bold white header on a black background, alternating row colors, thin black borders, and proper alignment for text and numeric columns.

	A	B	C	D	E
1	Title	Author	Publisher	Year	ISBN
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					
13				Total books	0
14					
15					

Figure 1-1 The reference table to build

What You Will Build

Exercise 1 asks us to create an Excel template describing books.

The workbook should contain a single worksheet with a table named MainTable and the following columns:

- Title
- Author
- Publisher
- Year
- ISBN

The table should include 10 empty rows. Then it should be formatted carefully:

- text formatting for the text-based columns
- a custom ISBN format for the last column
- a total row outside the table to count the books
- a specific visual style for the header, rows, alignment, and borders

This is exactly the kind of task where ChatGPT can save time. The structure is detailed enough to describe clearly, but repetitive enough that writing it all manually in Excel would take longer than necessary.

To solve the exercise, use the five-step prompting method shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2-2 Five Step Method

Step 1: Start with a Framing Prompt

The solution file begins with an opening instruction that frames the whole interaction:

```
I want to create an Excel template describing books. I'll
provide you with all the options to include in the template,
and when I have finished, you'll format it as an .xlsx
file.
```

This first sentence is more important than it looks.

It tells ChatGPT three things:

1. the task is template creation
2. the domain is books
3. the final output should be an Excel file

This kind of framing reduces ambiguity. Instead of asking for a vague “book spreadsheet,” we define the context before giving the details.

Step 2: Define the Table Structure

The next part of the prompt specifies the worksheet and columns:

```
Create a single worksheet containing a table with the
following columns:
- Title
- Author
- Publisher
- Year
- ISBN
Format the table as an Excel table and name it MainTable.
Add 10 empty rows to the table.
```

More specifically, the prompt asks to:

- create a single worksheet
- add a table with Title, Author, Publisher, Year, and ISBN
- format it as an Excel table
- name it MainTable
- add 10 empty rows

This is the backbone of the file.

What I like about this part of the exercise is that it shows a useful rule for working with ChatGPT and Excel: define the structure before you define the style.

If the model does not know the exact worksheet layout, everything that follows becomes less reliable. Formatting instructions make more sense only after the table itself is fixed.

Step 3: Add Cell Formatting Rules

Once the structure is defined, the solution adds number-format instructions:

```
Format cells Number as follows:
```

- Column A as text
- Column B as text
- Column C as text
- Column D as text
- Column E as custom: ###-#-###-#####-#

This step is subtle, but very practical.

Without formatting rules, ChatGPT might still generate a spreadsheet that looks correct at first glance while handling values inconsistently. For example, an ISBN should not be treated as a normal number. It is an identifier. The custom pattern makes the intent explicit.

This is a good example of something I insist on throughout the book: when data has a semantic meaning, the prompt should reflect that meaning.

Step 4: Add Logic Outside the Table

The exercise then asks for an extra row below the table:

```
Add a row below ISBN and outside of the table for total books, calculated as the count of all the rows.
```

This is a nice detail because it turns a static template into a slightly smarter one.

Even though the workbook is mostly empty at the beginning, the total row gives the file a clear purpose. It also reminds us that templates are not only about layout. They are also about the small pieces of logic that make later use easier.

In practice, this means ChatGPT is not only building a table. It is also building the beginning of a workflow.

Step 5: Define the Visual Style Explicitly

The last major block of the solution covers styling for MainTable:

Apply the following style to the table MainTable:

```
First row:
```

- Set the text to bold
- Set the text color to white
- Set the background color to black

- Align text to the center

Other rows:

- Align text to the left for text columns and right for numeric columns
- Alternate the background color of the row starting from the second between light gray and white

Borders:

- Apply thin black borders

This level of detail is exactly what makes the prompt strong.

Many users stop too early and ask ChatGPT to “make it look good.” That request is convenient, but not precise. Here, instead, every visual decision is stated clearly. The result is much easier to evaluate because the instructions are concrete.

Putting It All Together

Common Mistakes

When we combine all these steps, the final prompt becomes less like a casual request and more like a design specification.

That is the real lesson of Exercise 1.

We are using ChatGPT to execute a well-defined template plan. The better the specification, the more useful the generated file becomes.

In this sense, the solution is not only about books. It teaches a reusable method:

- open with context
- define the structure
- define formatting
- define logic
- define style

This same sequence can be reused for many other Excel templates.

How to Validate the Result

Once ChatGPT produces the workbook, I would not stop there. I would validate five things:

1. Is there only one worksheet?
2. Is the table really named MainTable?
3. Are there exactly 10 empty rows in the table?

4. Is the ISBN column using the requested custom format?
5. Is the total row outside the table and counting correctly?

Then I would check the visual rules:

- header colors
- alignment
- alternating row colors
- borders

This final review matters because template generation is useful only when the output is trustworthy enough to reuse.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

There are three common mistakes in this kind of exercise.

The first is being too vague. If you omit details such as the table name, row count, or column formats, the output may still look reasonable but fail to meet your actual needs.

The second is mixing structure and style without order. If the layout is unclear, styling instructions can become inconsistent.

The third is skipping validation. A generated workbook should always be checked before it is used as a reusable template.

Exercise 1 from Chapter 3 is a compact but very practical example of how to use ChatGPT to build an Excel template from scratch.

For me, this is one of the clearest practical lessons from Chapter 3: ChatGPT is most helpful in Excel when we use it to reduce repetitive setup work without sacrificing precision.

Repository Files

- 03/exercise1_solution.txt - Prompt or solution text

Reference Solution

Source file: [03/exercise1_solution.txt](#)

```
I want to create an Excel template describing books. I'll provide you with all the options to include in the template, and when I have finished, you'll format it as an .xlsx file.
```

```
Create a single worksheet containing a table with the following columns:
```

- Title
- Author
- Publisher

- Year
- ISBN

Format the table as an Excel table and name it MainTable.

Add 10 empty rows to the table.

Format cells Number as follows:

- Column A as text
- Column B as text
- Column C as text
- Column D as text
- Column E as custom: ###-#-###-#####-#

Add a row below ISBN and outside of the table for total books, calculated as the count of all the rows.

Apply the following style to the table MainTable:

First row:

- Set the text to bold
- Set the text color to white
- Set the background color to black
- Align text to the center

Other rows:

- Align text to the left for text columns and right for numeric columns
- Alternate the background color of the row starting from the second between light gray and white

Borders:

- Apply thin black borders