

# How to Return a Date Format with VLOOKUP in Excel

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## Understanding the Challenge of Dates in VLOOKUP

The VLOOKUP function is an indispensable tool in Excel, designed to locate a specific value within the first column of a table array and retrieve a corresponding data point from the same row. While its search capabilities are robust, a common challenge arises when the desired return value is a date. When a standard VLOOKUP operation successfully identifies a date field, the result often appears as an unformatted numerical value, known as a serial date number, rather than the expected calendar format. This seemingly minor issue can significantly impede data readability and reporting consistency, making it essential to understand how to manage output formatting directly within the formula structure.

The inability of a naked VLOOKUP result to retain or apply a preferred date format stems from how Excel handles dates internally. Unlike plain text, dates are stored as sequential numbers starting from January 1, 1900. When VLOOKUP pulls this numerical value, it relies on the destination cell's default formatting, which may interpret the number literally rather than as a date.

Fortunately, advanced users can overcome this formatting hurdle by nesting the VLOOKUP function within the powerful TEXT function. The TEXT function explicitly instructs Excel how to display a numerical value (in this case, the date serial number returned by VLOOKUP) using a specific, user-defined format string. This technique ensures that your retrieved date is presented exactly as required for reporting and analysis.

Often when you use the **VLOOKUP** function in Excel to look up a specific value and return a corresponding date, the date will be shown as a number instead of a date.

## The Necessity of Excel Date Serial Numbers

To effectively manipulate date outputs, it is crucial to recognize the underlying mechanism Excel employs for storing temporal data. Dates are not stored as '12/31/2024' but rather as a simple count of days elapsed since January 1, 1900. This numerical representation is called a **serial date number**. For instance, the date January 1, 2024, corresponds to the serial number 45292. When the VLOOKUP function retrieves this value, it is retrieving the number 45292. If the cell where the formula resides is formatted generally, it displays 45292, which is meaningless to the end-user seeking a start date.

While one common method to fix this is manually changing the cell format after the VLOOKUP is executed, this approach is fragile. If the formula is moved, copied, or used within other functions, the formatting can easily revert or be lost. Furthermore, manual formatting does not enforce the consistency needed for complex dashboards or reports.

The superior solution is to wrap the VLOOKUP result within a function that specifically dictates the

output format regardless of the destination cell's default settings. This is precisely the role of the TEXT function.

## Integrating VLOOKUP with the TEXT Function for Guaranteed Date Formatting

The TEXT function converts a value to text and applies a specified number formatting string. Its syntax is straightforward: **=TEXT(value, format\_text)**. In our case, the **value** argument will be the serial date number returned by the VLOOKUP formula, and the **format\_text** argument will be the desired date format enclosed in quotation marks, such as "M/D/YYYY".

By nesting VLOOKUP inside TEXT, we ensure that the numerical output of the lookup operation is immediately processed and converted into a readable text string that represents the date in the specified style. This conversion is crucial because the output of the combined formula is always a text string, not a numerical date.

You can force the **VLOOKUP** to return the date in a specific date format by using the **TEXT** function as follows:

```
=TEXT(VLOOKUP(D2, A2:B13, 2), "M/D/YYYY")
```

This specific formula is highly effective: it instructs Excel to find the lookup value in cell **D2** within the designated table array **A2:B13** and return the corresponding value from the second column (index 2). Crucially, the external TEXT function then takes this numerical result and formats it into the desirable **M/D/YYYY** date format.

## Practical Scenario: Retrieving Employee Start Dates

To demonstrate the application of the nested TEXT and VLOOKUP functions, let us consider a common business scenario involving employee data. We have a primary dataset listing employee names and their respective start dates within a company. Our objective is to efficiently look up a specific employee's name and retrieve their date of commencement, ensuring the output is presented in a clear, standardized calendar date format.

Imagine the following dataset, detailing various employees' names and their starting dates:

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	<b>Employee</b>	<b>Start Date</b>				
2	Andy	1/1/2024				
3	Bob	1/15/2024				
4	Chad	3/14/2024				
5	Doug	2/10/2020				
6	Eric	10/25/2019				
7	Frank	10/13/2022				
8	Greg	1/4/2023				
9	Henry	6/30/2021				
10	Isaac	1/1/2022				
11	John	1/3/2022				
12	Kendall	4/9/2018				
13	Luke	4/15/2019				
14						
15						
16						
17						
18						
19						
20						

In this example, the names are located in column A and the corresponding start dates are in column B, spanning the range **A2:B13**. For this demonstration, we wish to perform a lookup specifically for the employee named "Andy" and return the date recorded in column B that corresponds to his entry in column A.

### The Initial Attempt: Why VLOOKUP Returns a Serial Number

Our first attempt involves using the standard VLOOKUP syntax to retrieve Andy's start date, assuming the lookup value "Andy" is entered in cell **D2**. The formula we apply is designed to search the table array **A2:B13** and return the value from the second column:

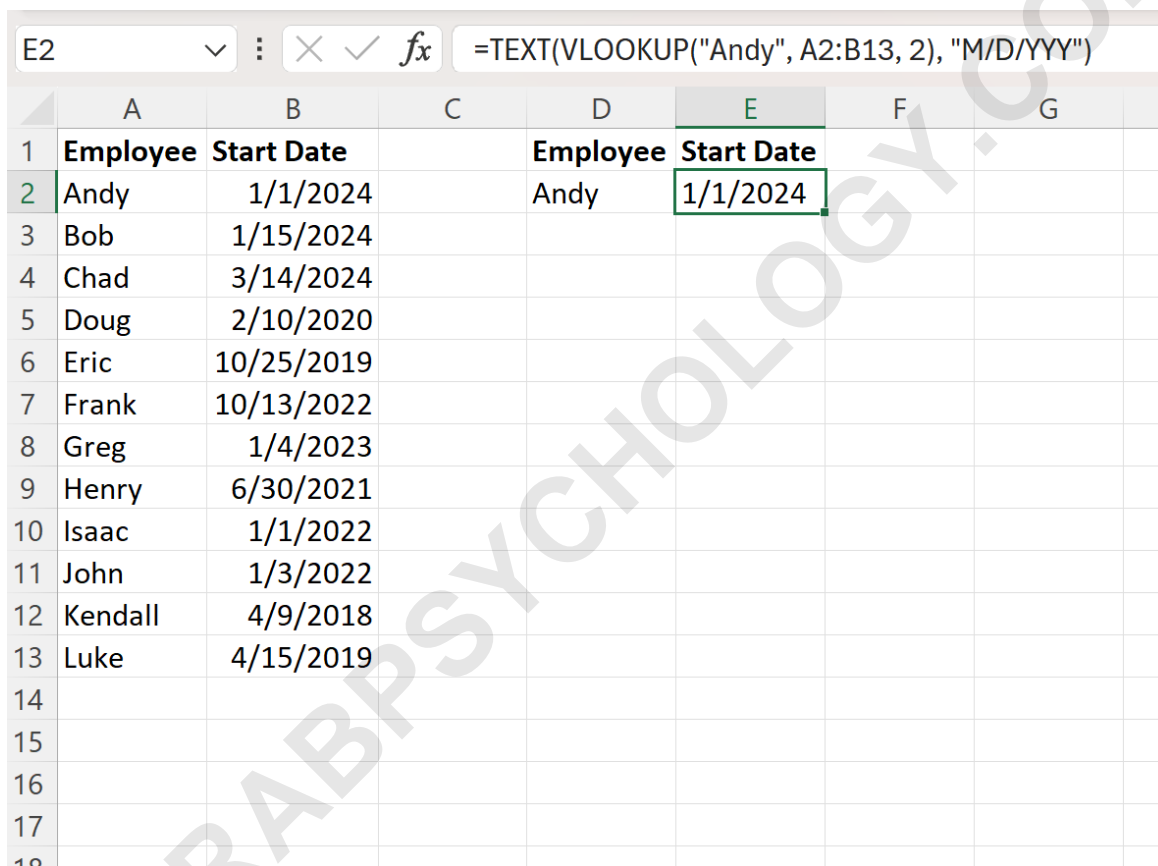
**=VLOOKUP(D2, A2:B13, 2)**

When executed, the function successfully locates "Andy" and correctly retrieves the corresponding value from column B. However, as illustrated in the resulting screenshot below, the output is not the familiar 1/1/2024 but rather its numerical equivalent, 45292.



Here, the lookup operation **VLOOKUP(D2, A2:B13, 2)** executes first, returning the numerical date (45292). This number is then passed as the **value** argument to the external TEXT function, which interprets the number as a date and converts it into the specified text string format, "M/D/YYYY".

The practical outcome of implementing this enhanced formula is immediately evident. As shown in the following screenshot, the cell now displays the correct, readable date format **1/1/2024**, successfully indicating Andy's start date, precisely formatted as requested by the user. This demonstrates the power of combining these functions to maintain data integrity and presentation quality within complex spreadsheets.



	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	<b>Employee</b>	<b>Start Date</b>		<b>Employee</b>	<b>Start Date</b>		
2	Andy	1/1/2024		Andy	1/1/2024		
3	Bob	1/15/2024					
4	Chad	3/14/2024					
5	Doug	2/10/2020					
6	Eric	10/25/2019					
7	Frank	10/13/2022					
8	Greg	1/4/2023					
9	Henry	6/30/2021					
10	Isaac	1/1/2022					
11	John	1/3/2022					
12	Kendall	4/9/2018					
13	Luke	4/15/2019					
14							
15							
16							
17							
18							

Notice that the formula returns **1/1/2024**, which is the start date for Andy formatted as a date.

## Customizing Date Output with Format Codes

One of the greatest advantages of utilizing the TEXT function is the extensive flexibility it provides in customizing the output display. You are not limited to standard formats like M/D/YYYY; you can specify virtually any custom date format code string within the second argument of the function. This enables adherence to specific regional standards, governmental reporting requirements, or personal preference.

Also note that you can use the **TEXT** function to specify any date format that you would like. The format codes are essential for instructing Excel exactly how to construct the date text string. For example:

"**M/D/YYYY**": Displays month and day as single digits if applicable (e.g., 1/1/2024).

"**MM/DD/YYYY**": Displays month and day with leading zeros (e.g., 01/01/2024).

"**DD-MMM-YY**": Displays day, abbreviated month name, and two-digit year (e.g., 01-Jan-24).

"**DDDD, MMMM D, YYYY**": Displays the full weekday and full month name (e.g., Monday, January 1, 2024).

This level of control ensures that data retrieved via VLOOKUP is ready for immediate consumption without requiring post-processing or manual cell formatting.

### Example: Implementing the ISO Standard YYYY-MM-DD Format

A globally recognized and highly useful format, particularly for international data exchange and sorting, is the ISO 8601 standard, often represented as **YYYY-MM-DD**. If your organization requires this standardized output, you can easily modify the format argument within the TEXT function.

For example, you could use the following formula to specify a **YYYY-MM-DD** format instead:

```
=TEXT(VLOOKUP(D2, A2:B13, 2), "YYYY-MM-DD")
```

Upon execution, this adjusted formula searches for "Andy" and retrieves his start date serial number, which is then immediately converted into the ISO-compliant text string. The resulting output is shown below:

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	<b>Employee</b>	<b>Start Date</b>		<b>Employee</b>	<b>Start Date</b>			
2	Andy	1/1/2024		Andy	2024-01-01			
3	Bob	1/15/2024						
4	Chad	3/14/2024						
5	Doug	2/10/2020						
6	Eric	10/25/2019						
7	Frank	10/13/2022						
8	Greg	1/4/2023						
9	Henry	6/30/2021						
10	Isaac	1/1/2022						
11	John	1/3/2022						
12	Kendall	4/9/2018						
13	Luke	4/15/2019						
14								
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19								

Notice that the formula returns **2024-01-01**, which is the start date for Andy formatted using the date format that we specified. This conversion highlights that by nesting VLOOKUP within TEXT, you gain explicit control over the presentation layer of your data retrieval, ensuring consistency and adherence to specific formatting protocols.

### Important Consideration: Output Data Type

It is vital to remember the fundamental consequence of using the TEXT function: the resulting output is always a **text string**, even if it looks exactly like a date. While this solves the display issue perfectly for reporting and visualization purposes, it means the result cannot be used directly in subsequent mathematical calculations that require a true numerical date (e.g., finding the number of days between the retrieved start date and today).

If you need to retrieve a date that retains its underlying numerical value for calculations, you should use a simple VLOOKUP and apply manual cell formatting (or conditional formatting) to the destination cell. However, if the primary goal is clean reporting, display consistency, or concatenation with other strings, the TEXT(VLOOKUP(...)) method is the reliable solution.

## Further Resources for Advanced Excel Operations

Mastering the combination of lookup functions and formatting wrappers like TEXT is a significant step toward becoming proficient in data manipulation within spreadsheets. These techniques allow for complex data extraction while maintaining high levels of visual clarity and standardization.

The following tutorials explain how to perform other common operations in Excel:

Using the newer XLOOKUP function (which often handles formatting better).

Combining INDEX and MATCH for two-way lookups.

Applying Conditional Formatting based on retrieved dates.

These concepts build upon the foundational knowledge of VLOOKUP and ensure you have the necessary tools to handle virtually any data retrieval scenario.