

How to Easily Compare Dates in Google Sheets: A Step-by-Step Guide

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November 30, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

stats writer (2025). *How to Easily Compare Dates in Google Sheets: A Step-by-Step Guide*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=102578>

Analyzing and comparing dates is a fundamental requirement in data management, particularly within Google Sheets. While dates appear to us as human-readable strings (like "1/1/2024"), spreadsheets treat them as numerical values. This understanding is key to performing accurate comparisons. This process, while seemingly simple, often requires leveraging powerful built-in functions like the IF function and sometimes the DATEVALUE function, especially when dealing with dates imported as text. By converting or recognizing these date values, we can use standard logical operators (>, <, =) to determine chronological order or equality, ultimately allowing us to automate complex data decisions based on time.

The core principle relies on the ability of Google Sheets to assign a unique serial number to every date. This numerical representation makes direct comparison reliable and efficient. Whether you need to find the latest deadline, filter records based on a specific time frame, or calculate the duration between two events, mastering date comparison techniques in Google Sheets is essential for robust data analysis.

Understanding Date Serialization for Comparison

Before implementing comparison formulas, it is critical to grasp how Google Sheets stores date information. Unlike standard text strings, dates are stored internally as sequential serial numbers. By default, day 1 is January 1, 1900. Therefore, a date like today is represented by a large integer corresponding to the number of days elapsed since that baseline date. This numerical treatment is what enables instantaneous and accurate chronological comparison between any two given dates.

When you compare two dates, the application is simply comparing two large integers. If Date A has a larger serial number than Date B, Date A is chronologically later. If the dates are properly formatted, this conversion happens automatically. However, if data is imported and remains formatted as plain text, using functions like the DATEVALUE function becomes necessary to force the textual date into its comparable numerical format. For the most part, though, direct cell comparison is sufficient if formatting is correct.

Essential Logical Operators for Date Comparison

The most straightforward way to compare dates in Google Sheets is through the use of standard logical operators. These operators return a **Boolean** result (TRUE or FALSE) based on the relationship between the two date values being analyzed. This method is fundamental for conditional decision-making within your spreadsheet logic.

For the following examples, we assume that you are comparing date values residing in cells **A1** and **B1**. Remember, reliability hinges on both **A1** and **B1** being correctly recognized as date formats.

You can use the following methods to compare date values in cells **A1** and **B1** in Google Sheets:

Method 1: Check if Dates are Equal

This method uses the equality operator (=) to verify if the two dates occur on the exact same day. If the serial numbers of both dates match, the formula returns **TRUE**.

=A1=B1

Method 2: Check if Dates are Not Equal

If you need to confirm that the two dates are distinct (they fall on different days), utilize the inequality operator (<>). This is useful when actions must only proceed if a difference in timing exists.

=A1<>B1

Method 3: Check if First Date is Greater than Second Date

To determine if the first date (**A1**) occurred later than the second date (**B1**), use the greater than operator (>). Since later dates have larger serial numbers, this comparison effectively checks if **A1** holds a higher numerical value than **B1**.

=A1>B1

Method 4: Check if First Date is Less than Second Date

Use the less than operator (<) to verify if the first date (**A1**) precedes the second date (**B1**) chronologically. This operation is crucial for validating timelines, ensuring, for instance, that a start date is earlier than an end date.

=A1<B1

Method 5: Complex Comparison with IFS() for Custom Output

While the basic comparisons return simple TRUE/FALSE values, practical applications often demand a specific, descriptive output. The IFS function allows you to evaluate multiple conditions in sequence and return a value corresponding to the first condition that is met. This avoids the complexity of nesting multiple IF functions.

In this advanced application, we explicitly check all three possibilities: A1 is later than B1, A1 is

earlier than B1, or they are equal, providing a clear text label for each outcome.

Method 5: Find Which Date is Latest

=IFS(A1>B1, "First Date", A1<B1, "Second Date", A1=B1, "Equal")

The following example shows how to use each method in practice.

Example: Compare Dates in Google Sheets

To demonstrate these concepts, consider a scenario where we have two columns containing various dates that require comparison. This visual example allows us to see how the Boolean and conditional results change based on the date pair in each row.

Suppose we have two columns in Google Sheets that each contain date values:

	A	B	C
1	First Date	Second Date	
2	1/1/2022	1/4/2022	
3	1/9/2022	1/5/2022	
4	1/10/2022	1/10/2022	
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			
14			
15			
16			
17			
18			

In the setup above, Columns A and B hold the date inputs. We will now apply the five comparison formulas across subsequent columns (C through G) to evaluate the chronological relationship for every row.

The following screenshot shows how to use the formulas defined earlier to compare the values in the date columns:

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	First Date	Second Date	Dates Equal?	Dates Not Equal?	First > Second?	First < Second?
2	1/1/2022	1/4/2022	FALSE	TRUE	FALSE	TRUE
3	1/9/2022	1/5/2022	FALSE	TRUE	TRUE	FALSE
4	1/10/2022	1/10/2022	TRUE	FALSE	FALSE	FALSE
5						
6			=A2=B2	=A2<>B2	=A2>B2	=A2<B2
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						
13						
14						
15						
16						
17						
18						

The results in columns C, D, E, and F illustrate the immediate **Boolean** feedback provided by the logical operators. Analyze the results row by row to confirm the behavior:

Column C: Equality Check (**=A2=B2**). If the dates are equal, a value of **TRUE** is returned. Otherwise, **FALSE** is returned.

Column D: Inequality Check (**=A2<>B2**). If the dates are not equal, a value of **TRUE** is returned. Otherwise, **FALSE** is returned.

Column E: Greater Than Check (**=A2>B2**). If the first date is greater (i.e. later), a value of **TRUE** is returned. Otherwise, **FALSE** is returned.

Column F: Less Than Check (**=A2<B2**). If the first date is less (i.e. earlier), a value of **TRUE** is returned. Otherwise, **FALSE** is returned.

Using Conditional Functions for Enhanced Reporting

While the Boolean output is useful for underlying spreadsheet logic, custom text outputs are often necessary for final reports or user dashboards. The use of conditional functions like IFS function allows us to convert the raw logical comparison into a descriptive status.

The following screenshot also shows how to use an **IFS()** function to determine which date is

latest:

	A	B	C	D	E
1	First Date	Second Date	Latest Date		
2	1/1/2022	1/4/2022	Second Date		
3	1/9/2022	1/5/2022	First Date		
4	1/10/2022	1/10/2022	Equal		
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					
13					
14					

As depicted in the image, the IFS function (or a nested IF function) returns a specific text string based on which comparison condition is met first. This method significantly improves the interpretability of the results by replacing simple TRUE/FALSE with meaningful labels like "First Date," "Second Date," or "Equal."

Troubleshooting: Ensuring Correct Date Formatting

The most common pitfall when comparing dates in Google Sheets is incorrect cell formatting. If a value that looks like a date is stored as a text string, comparison operators will treat it alphabetically rather than numerically, leading to incorrect or unpredictable results. It is paramount that the comparison values are internally recognized as dates.

Note that these formulas will only work if the values in the first two columns are both formatted as dates.

If your comparison results are inconsistent, you must verify the cell format. If the cells display text alignment (usually left-aligned by default) instead of numeric/date alignment (usually right-aligned), or if the cell contents contain unusual characters, the date is likely stored as text. This necessitates correcting the format or using conversion functions.

To convert the values in each column to date, simply highlight all of the date values, then click the **Format** tab along the top ribbon, then click **Number**, then click **Date**.

Alternatively, if permanent formatting correction is not feasible, you can temporarily convert a textual date within a formula using the DATEVALUE function. For instance, if A1 is text and B1 is a true date, the formula `=DATEVALUE(A1) > B1` ensures a proper numerical comparison. However, maintaining consistent date formatting across your dataset is the best practice for robust data analysis.

Summary of Date Comparison Techniques

Effective date comparison in Google Sheets relies on the software's ability to treat dates as increasing serial numbers. By employing standard logical operators (for simple Boolean checks) and advanced functions like IFS (for customized results), you gain powerful control over temporal data. Always ensure your data is correctly formatted as a date to prevent textual comparisons that yield inaccurate results. These methods provide the foundation for time-based filtering, reporting, and complex scheduling analysis.

The following tutorials provide additional information on how to work with dates in Google Sheets: