

How to Delete Every Other Column in Excel (With Example)

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In data management and analysis, situations frequently arise where specific structural alterations are required within a dataset. A common, yet seemingly complex, task in Microsoft Excel involves the selective removal of columns based on a specific pattern, such as deleting every other column. Direct deletion of alternating columns manually can be time-consuming and prone to error, especially when dealing with extensive spreadsheets containing hundreds or thousands of columns. This document provides an expert, step-by-step methodology using advanced sorting techniques to efficiently achieve this objective, ensuring data integrity and optimizing workflow.

Consider a scenario where you are presented with a financial dataset documenting sales performance, structured sequentially across eight years. However, the data also includes supplementary metrics (e.g., quarterly summaries or intermediate calculations) positioned in the alternating columns that are no longer needed for your current analysis. Our goal is to filter this structure to retain only the core annual data points, specifically Year 1, Year 3, Year 5, and Year 7, while systematically eliminating the extraneous intermediate columns.

The core challenge in deleting alternating columns lies in Excel's default behavior, which requires sequential selection. Our proposed solution leverages a temporary "helper row" and specialized horizontal sorting capabilities to group the unwanted columns together, making bulk deletion simple and reliable. This approach transforms a repetitive manual task into a quick, automated process.

The initial state of the dataset, illustrating sales values across eight consecutive years, is shown below. Notice the uniform structure where every column requires attention:

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8
2	150	200	120	150	110	100	200	180
3	100	205	180	180	150	95	205	180
4	78	180	150	190	175	90	190	140
5	90	140	150	203	180	140	158	190
6	91	190	135	200	190	93	160	200
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The desired final output, after executing the deletion of every other column, should resemble the clean structure displayed in the following image, containing only the specified years:

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	Year 1	Year 3	Year 5	Year 7		
2	150	120	110	200		
3	100	180	150	205		
4	78	150	175	190		
5	90	150	180	158		
6	91	135	190	160		
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Step 1: Initializing the Data Structure in Excel

Before any data manipulation begins, it is essential to ensure that the dataset is correctly entered and verified within the Microsoft Excel worksheet. This foundational step ensures that subsequent operations, particularly sorting, operate on accurate data ranges. Failure to properly define the data boundaries can lead to partial or incorrect column selection during the later stages of the process.

For the purpose of this detailed tutorial, we will use the following example structure. This structure includes seven rows of data and eight columns, representing the eight years of sales information. Ensure your data closely matches this layout, especially concerning the column headers (Year 1 through Year 8), which serve as crucial identifiers throughout the process.

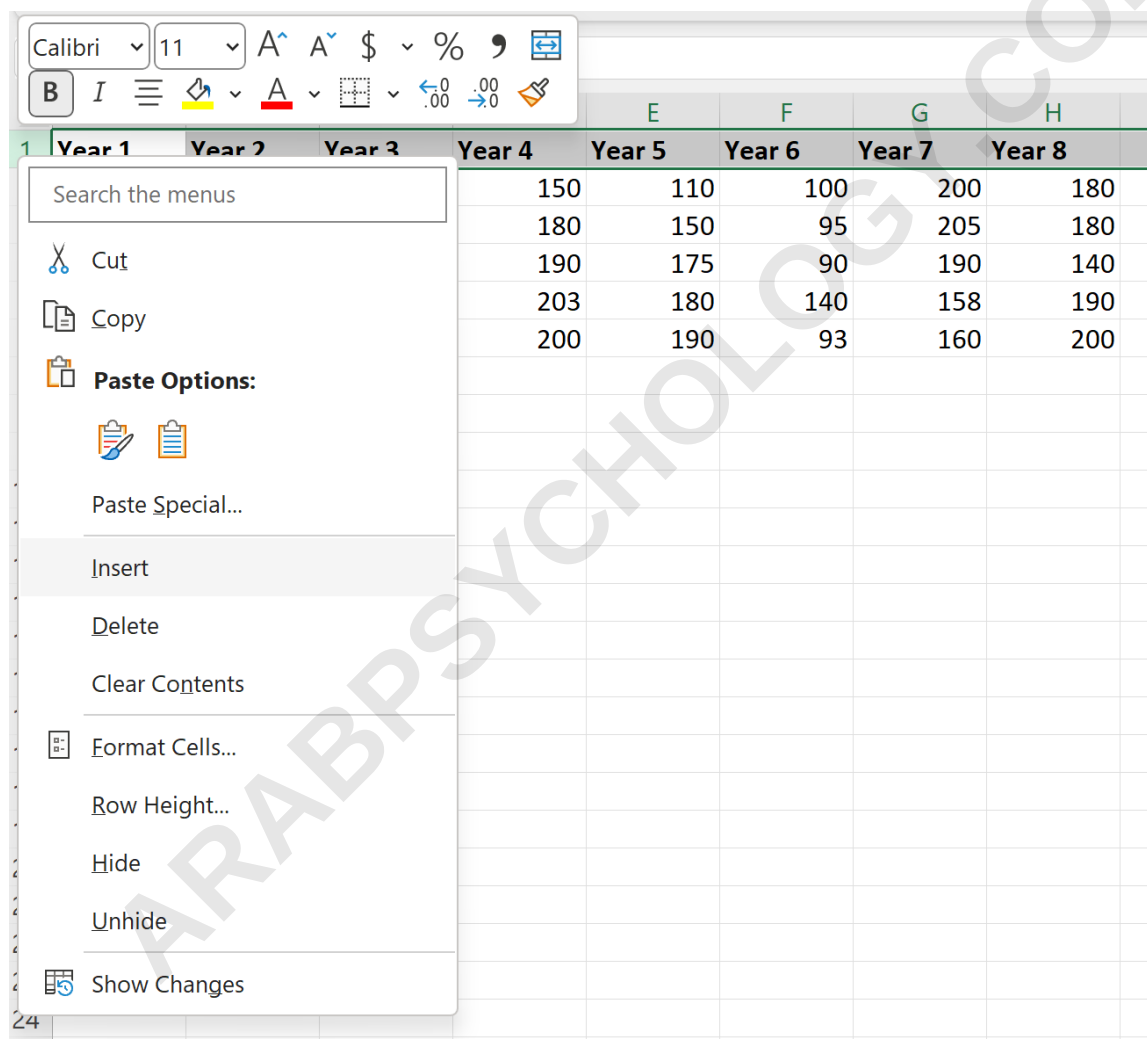
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8
2	150	200	120	150	110	100	200	180
3	100	205	180	180	150	95	205	180
4	78	180	150	190	175	90	190	140
5	90	140	150	203	180	140	158	190
6	91	190	135	200	190	93	160	200
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It is generally recommended to work with a copy of your original data when performing structural manipulations like column deletion. This redundancy acts as a safeguard against accidental data loss, allowing you to easily revert if an unintended consequence occurs during the sorting or deletion steps. Once the data is entered and verified, we are ready to introduce the temporary mechanism necessary for selective manipulation.

Step 2: Inserting and Populating the Helper Row

The key technique for managing alternating columns involves the creation of a temporary "helper row." This row serves as a categorical identifier, instructing Excel how to group and sort the columns effectively. This approach overcomes the limitations of sequential selection by assigning a sortable attribute to each column.

The first action in this step is to insert a new, blank row immediately above the existing data. To accomplish this, Excel users should right-click on the row number of the current first row (Row 1) and select the **Insert** option from the context-sensitive dropdown menu that appears. This action shifts the existing data down, creating a new, empty Row 1 dedicated to our helper function.



Next, we populate this new helper row (Row 1) with alternating labels that denote our intention for each column. Begin by typing the label **Keep** into cell **A1**, corresponding to the data column we wish to retain (Year 1). Subsequently, type the label **Delete** into cell **B1**, corresponding to the column intended for removal (Year 2). This establishes the alternating pattern.

To efficiently apply this pattern across the entire width of the dataset, highlight both cell **A1** and cell

B1 simultaneously. Using the fill handle--the small square at the bottom right corner of the selection--drag this pattern horizontally to the right until you reach the final column of your data (in our example, column H). Excel's intelligent fill functionality will automatically replicate the "Keep" and "Delete" labels in the correct alternating sequence across the entire span of the header row, providing the necessary sorting key.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	Keep	Delete						
2	Year 1	Year 2	 r 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Delete 8
3	150	200	120	150	110	100	200	180
4	100	205	180	180	150	95	205	180
5	78	180	150	190	175	90	190	140
6	90	140	150	203	180	140	158	190
7	91	190	135	200	190	93	160	200
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This helper row now provides a clear, sortable category for every column, setting the stage for the crucial horizontal sorting operation in the next step.

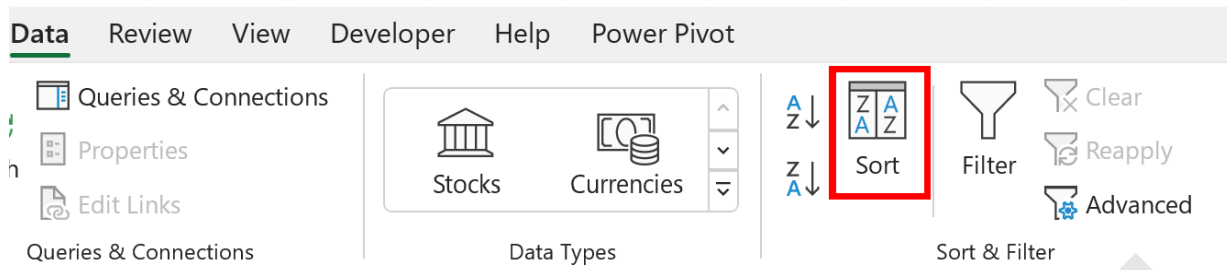
Step 3: Configuring the Horizontal Sorting Parameters

The transformation of the data structure relies entirely on Excel's advanced sorting feature, which, by default, is configured for vertical sorting (row-by-row). We must explicitly instruct Excel to sort horizontally (column-by-column) based on the values established in the helper row.

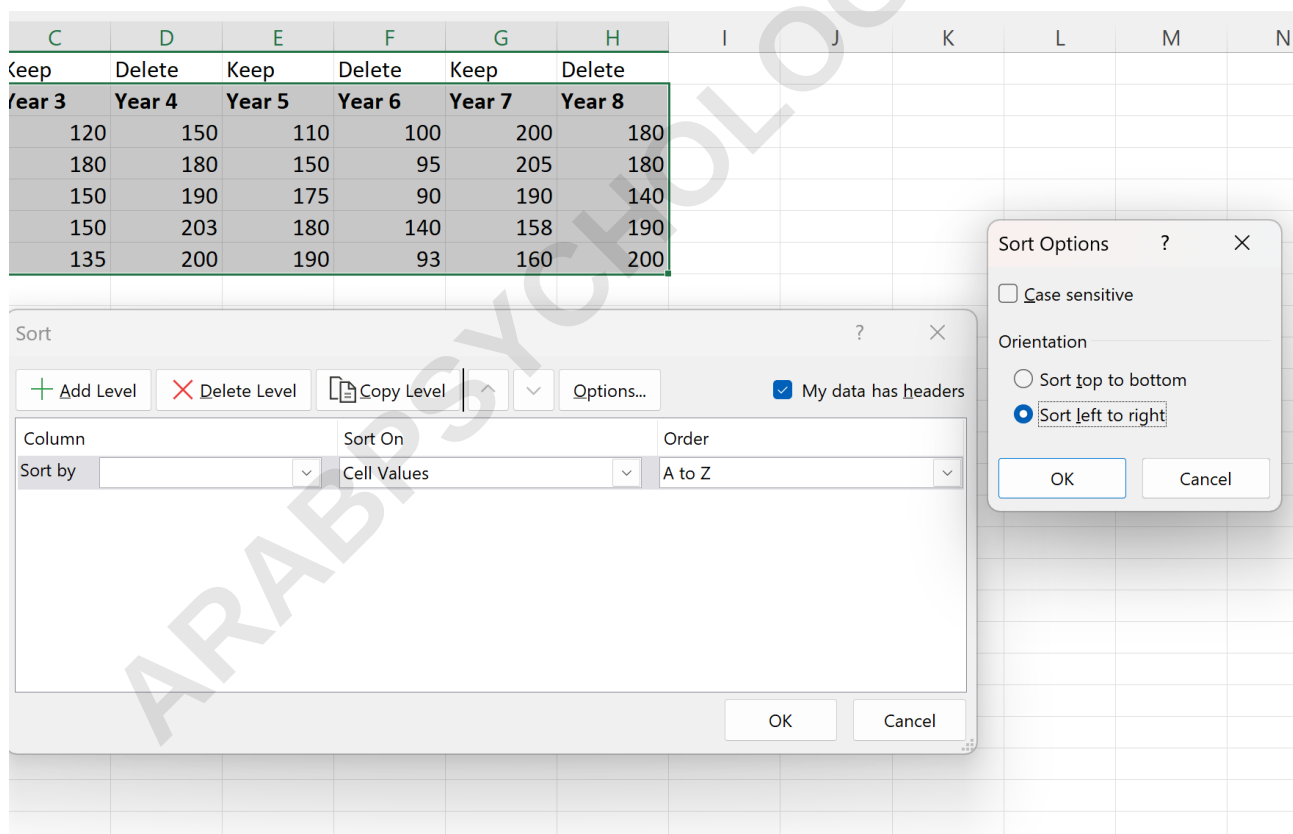
Begin by precisely highlighting the entire data range, including the newly created helper row. In our example, this corresponds to the range **A1:H7**. It is imperative that the selection encompasses both the helper row and all subsequent data rows, as sorting only the helper row would separate it from the corresponding data, leading to corruption.

Once the range is highlighted, navigate to the Data tab located on the top ribbon menu in Excel. Within the **Sort & Filter** group, locate and click the **Sort** icon. This action opens the main Sort

dialog box, where configuration adjustments are necessary.



Inside the Sort dialog box, locate and click the **Options** button. This opens a smaller secondary window, allowing you to customize the sorting orientation. Crucially, select the radio button labeled **Sort left to right**. This setting overrides the default vertical sorting and prepares the system to move columns instead of rows. Confirm this selection by clicking **OK**.



After adjusting the orientation, return to the primary Sort dialog box. The fields will now be oriented horizontally. In the **Sort by** dropdown box, you must select **Row 1**. This action tells Excel to use the values contained in the helper row (Row 1, containing "Keep" and "Delete") as the determining factor for the column order. Ensure that the **Order** is set to **A to Z** (or smallest to largest). Since 'D' for Delete precedes 'K' for Keep alphabetically, this configuration ensures that all "Delete" columns

are moved to the left side of the data range, separating them cleanly from the "Keep" columns.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1	Keep	Delete	Keep	Delete	Keep	Delete	Keep	Delete	
2	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	
3	150	200	120	150	110	100	200	180	
4	100	205	180	180	150	95	205	180	
5	78	180	150	190	175	90	190	140	
6	90	140	150	203	180	140	158	190	
7	91	190	135	200	190	93	160	200	
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Options...

☒ My data has headers

Row

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Row 1

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Cell Values

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Order

A to Z

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OK

Cancel

Step 4: Executing the Column Reordering

With the horizontal sorting parameters correctly defined in Step 3, clicking the final **OK** button initiates the process. This is where the magic of the helper row technique becomes apparent: Excel instantly reorders the entire dataset, shifting the columns horizontally based on the value in Row 1.

Due to our configuration (Sort A to Z based on Row 1), all columns labeled "Delete" are automatically grouped and moved to the far left of the spreadsheet, followed sequentially by all columns labeled "Keep." The crucial aspect of this step is that the underlying data for each column remains perfectly intact and associated with its original header information, even though the physical order has changed.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	
1	Delete	Delete	Delete	Delete	Keep	Keep	Keep	Keep	
2	Year 2	Year 4	Year 6	Year 8	Year 1	Year 3	Year 5	Year 7	
3	200	150	100	180	150	120	110	200	
4	205	180	95	180	100	180	150	205	
5	180	190	90	140	78	150	175	190	
6	140	203	140	190	90	150	180	158	
7	190	200	93	200	91	135	190	160	
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Observe the resulting layout: the first four columns now contain the data corresponding to Year 2, Year 4, Year 6, and Year 8, all marked by the "Delete" label. The remaining four columns contain the desired data (Year 1, Year 3, Year 5, Year 7), marked by the "Keep" label. This grouping action has effectively isolated the unwanted data, turning the task of deleting alternating columns into a simple bulk selection and deletion operation.

This intermediate step is a powerful demonstration of how temporary data structures, like the helper row, can unlock complex data manipulations within standard spreadsheet software. By converting a positional requirement (every other column) into a categorical requirement ("Delete" vs. "Keep"), we simplify the final execution phase significantly.

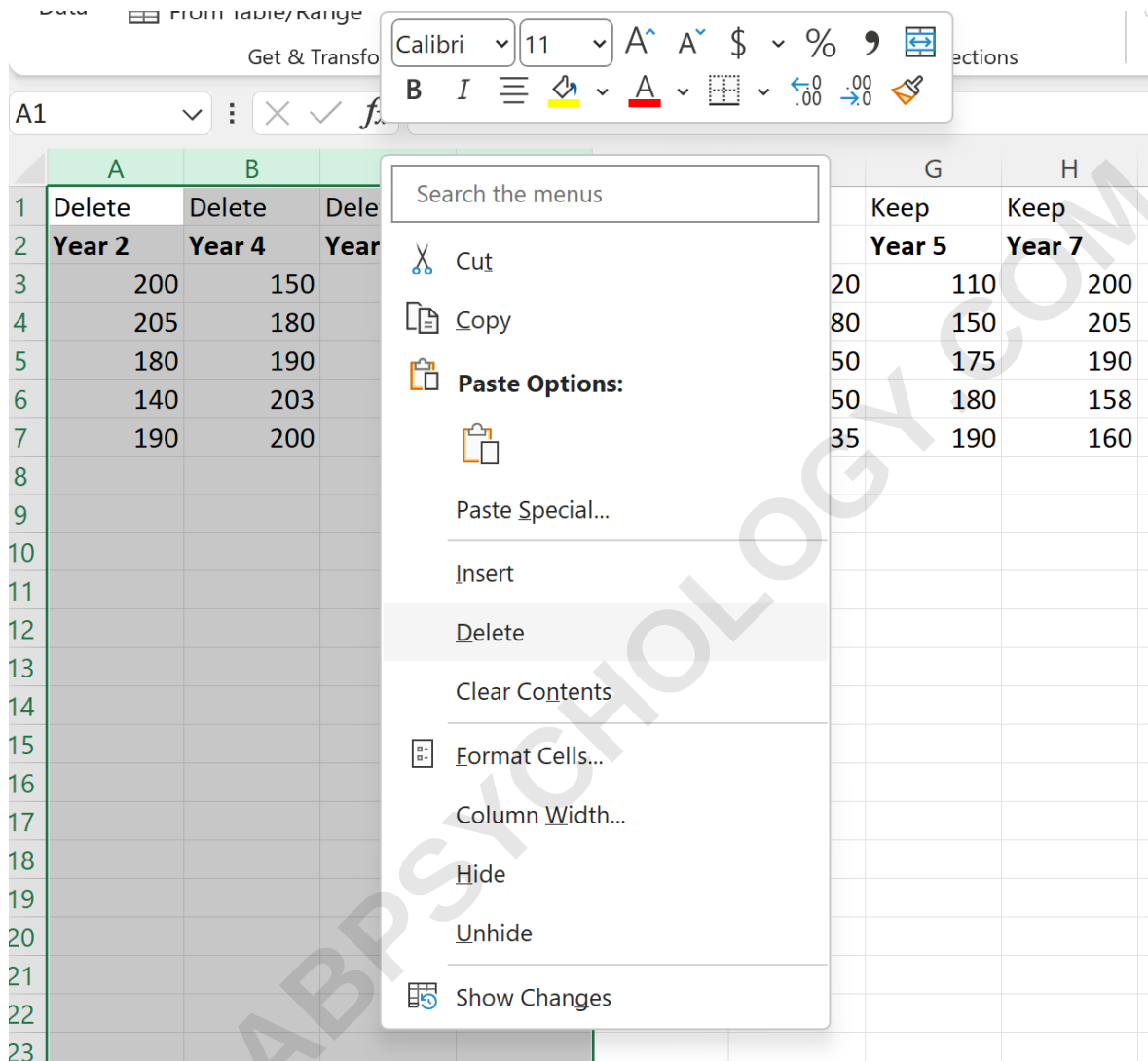
Step 5: Finalizing the Deletion and Cleanup

The final step involves the permanent removal of the now-grouped unwanted columns, followed by the optional cleanup of the temporary helper row, thereby restoring the data structure to its intended, streamlined format.

Since the sorting operation has successfully isolated the columns intended for removal to the left side of the sheet, you can now select them all simultaneously. In our example, this means highlighting the first four columns (Columns A, B, C, and D), which contain the Year 2, 4, 6, and 8 data. Exercise extreme care to ensure only the marked "Delete" columns are selected, referencing Row 1 for confirmation.

With the target columns highlighted, right-click on the header area (the letter identifier, e.g., A, B,

C, D) of the selected range. From the context menu that appears, click **Delete**. Excel will execute the command, instantly removing the selected columns and shifting the remaining columns (the "Keep" columns) to the left to close the gap, resulting in a contiguous and clean dataset.



Upon completion of the deletion, only the columns designated for retention--Year 1, Year 3, Year 5, and Year 7--will remain. The data is now properly filtered according to the initial requirement, demonstrating the successful execution of the alternating column deletion method.

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	Keep	Keep	Keep	Keep		
2	Year 1	Year 3	Year 5	Year 7		
3	150	120	110	200		
4	100	180	150	205		
5	78	150	175	190		
6	90	150	180	158		
7	91	135	190	160		
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The final stage is the cleanup. Since Row 1 (the helper row) was only created to facilitate the sorting mechanism, it is no longer needed. To finalize the process, highlight Row 1, right-click on the row number, and select **Delete**. This restores your dataset to its original starting row position (Row 1 containing the header titles), leaving you with a streamlined, filtered table containing only the required alternating columns.

Summary and Alternative Methods

The method described utilizes horizontal sorting and a temporary identifier row to achieve a complex structural transformation in Excel efficiently. This technique is highly effective for large datasets where manual deletion is impractical.

While this method is robust, alternative approaches exist, primarily involving the use of specialized formulas or Visual Basic for Applications (VBA). For users who frequently perform this task or deal with dynamically sized spreadsheets, scripting in VBA might offer a more automated, single-click solution. A simple VBA macro could iterate through the columns, deleting every second one programmatically. However, the helper row and sort method remains the most accessible, requiring no advanced programming knowledge and relying solely on standard Excel functionality.

In conclusion, mastering this sorting technique allows analysts and data professionals to quickly sanitize and prepare their data for downstream analysis by eliminating redundant or alternating columns without risking the integrity of the core dataset.