

# read.xlsx

by Antonio Fasano

There is a new function in the `read.*` family, `read.xlsx`, which can read Excel xlsx workbook sheets into R data frames. Some features are:

- It can import all, one, or a selection of sheets, where specific sheets are requested by means of their name.
- Instead of importing all the sheets' cells, it can import only those comprised in a named range.
- It can distinguish between cells formatted as numbers, percent, text and dates,
- Date cells are recognised whatever the language locale.
- Blank (visual) lines are detected and automatically removed from the data frame, unless you want to keep them.
- The filter is not based on any external engine and does not requires Excel to be installed at all. It's pure R code, so you can read xlsx files on Linux systems.

## Synopsis

```
read.xlsx(  
  file, sheets=NULL, header.sheets=FALSE, header.ranges=FALSE, ranges=NULL,  
  keepblanks=FALSE, allchars=FALSE, general='character', info)
```

**file** path to xlsx file.

**sheets** character vector with sheet names to read or NULL to read all.

**header.sheets** TRUE if, for all sheets, the first row is a header line to be used for column names. It can also be a logical vector whose values are TRUE (FALSE) for each sheet with (without) header.

**header.ranges** TRUE if, for all named ranges in **range**, the first row is a header line to be used for column names. It can also be a logical vector whose values are TRUE (FALSE) for each named range with (without) header.

**ranges** character vector with sheet names to read or NULL to not read use them.

**keepblanks** if true do not import rows or columns having only empty cells.

**allchars** If false do not infer cell style, but use always R character class.

**general** map Excel general format to 'character' or 'numeric'.

**info** list of: sheets' name; vector whose names are ranges and values their sheets; vector whose names are ranges and values their references.

**simplify** remove enclosing list for a single item.

## Details

If **header.sheets** is a logical vector, its length should match the length of the workbook sheets, including empty sheets, or the length of **sheets** if this argument is not NULL. Similarly, if **header.ranges** is a logical vector, its length should match the length of **range**.

**info** can be used only with **file**. The elements name of the list returned are: wbsheets, rg sheets, rgrefs.

## Setup

Currently the script is not in package form so, after downloading it, just source the R source with:

```
source('path\to\xlx.r')
```

You are done.

## Use it in the simplest form

Let us start from a sample the spreadsheet **survey.xlsx** (which you should find together with this manual), with consisting of an empty sheet and two sheets **Survey1** and **Survey2** with plain formatted data like the following:

---

### Sheet: Survey1

	A	B
1	Boys	Girls
2	10	20
3	30	40
4		
5		
6	Young	Old
7		20
8	30	40

### Sheet: Survey2

	A	B	C
1	EU		US
2	10		20
3	30		40

A file should come together with this manual, **survey.xlsx** which you can use to run the same code as here.

To import the file with all sheets simply run:

```
surv=read.xlsx('survey.xlsx')
```

```
## ... Loading cells in sheet 1
## Cell: 11 ... Reshaping sheet 1
## ... Loading cells in sheet 2
## Cell: 6 ... Reshaping sheet 2
## ... Loading cells in sheet 3
## Aggregating sheets
## Formatting sheet(s) as data frames
## Identifying and applying prevailing styles
## $Survey1
```

Above you see some info about the workbook being processed that we will not show anymore in the following.  
The result of your import is:

```
surv
```

```
## $Survey1
##      1      2
## 1 Boys Girls
## 2    10    20
## 3    30    40
## 6 Young  Old
## 7 <NA>    20
## 8    30    40
##
## $Survey2
##      1      3
## 1 EU US
## 2 10 20
## 3 30 40
```

```
class(surv)
```

```
## [1] "list"
```

```
lapply(surv, class)
```

```
## $Survey1
## [1] "data.frame"
##
## $Survey2
## [1] "data.frame"
```

```
names(surv$Survey1)
```

```
## [1] "1" "2"
```

Following the general convention for the `read.*` family of functions, the sheets are converted into data frames, plus data frames are wrapped into a list. The data frame comprising the list are named like the equivalent Excel sheet, here `Survey1` and `$Survey2`. As you guess from the output:

1. Blank sheets are by default not imported.
2. By default Excel column letters are converted to digits and set as the name of the data frame columns.
3. Blank lines, that is whole blank rows or columns, are removed, instead single blank cells inside data tables are reported as NA.
4. By default it is possible to identify skipped blank lines by reading the sequence of row and column numbers.

In case cells are not plain formatted and formatting inside columns is inconsistent R will coerce incoherent cell to the column prevailing format and issue a warning.

## Import individual workbook items

We can customise the default behaviour. For example let us assume we want to import only the sheet “Survey2”

```
surv= read.xlsx('survey.xlsx', sheets=c('survey2'))
```

As usual for a single item `sheets=c("survey2")` can be shortened as `sheets='survey2'`

Note that, respecting Excel convention the name is not case sensitive, so `survey2` works even if the actual sheet name is `Survey2`. The name used in the importing command will be the one stored in R, in case you later need to address it.

Another thing is that, since we asked for a single sheet, there is no need to wrap it in a now worthless list:

```
class(surv)
```

```
## [1] "data.frame"
```

```
surv
```

```
##      1  3
## 1 EU US
## 2 10 20
## 3 30 40
```

What about using the first sheet row as the data table names?

```
surv=read.xlsx('survey.xlsx', sheets=c("survey1", "survey2"), header.sheets=c(FALSE, TRUE))
```

With `header.sheets` we say for which imported sheets first row should be used for labelling data frame. In our case this is resp. `FALSE`, `TRUE` for “survey1”, “survey2”. In fact:

```
surv
```

```
## $survey1
##      1      2
## 1 Boys Girls
## 2   10   20
## 3   30   40
```

```
## 6 Young Old
## 7 <NA> 20
## 8 30 40
##
## $survey2
## EU US
## 2 10 20
## 3 30 40
```

```
names(surv$survey2)
```

```
## [1] "EU" "US"
```

There are no more digits for data frame names, but the names, taken from the first sheet row, are "EU" "US".

`header.sheets` are recycled. So `sheets=c("survey1", "survey2")`, `header.sheets=TRUE` means that for both "survey1" and "survey2" the first row will be used for labeling.

Note that the letter case is the same as the issued command, therefore now it is lowercase, while before it was the original case used in the file.

It is possible to query for named ranges too. The file `survey.xlsx` contains the named ranges `education` and `students`.

```
surv= read.xlsx('survey.xlsx', ranges=c('education', 'students'))
```

```
surv
```

```
## $education
##      1  2
## 6 Young Old
## 7 <NA> 20
## 8 30 40
##
## $students
##      1  2
## 1 Boys Girls
## 2 10 20
## 3 30 40
```

Again we can use the first line as header:

```
surv= read.xlsx('survey.xlsx', ranges='education', header.ranges=TRUE)
```

```
surv
```

```
## Young Old
## 7 <NA> 20
## 8 30 40
```

## Details for the non causal user

Sheets are converted into data frame following other R `read.*` functions' behaviour, which means that the values of a column share a common type. Anyway in the same Excel column different cells can have different formats. Why losing this information? It would have been possible to use a list object to model a sheet and so retain the differences, but most of the R statistic functions can effectively operate when at least at column level the formats are the same. That being said, when in a column there are different cell formats the prevailing compatible styles, will be applied to all. This will often involve the use of the R “character” type, because it is always compatible with numeric formats too.

Given this, recognised Excel styles and their R equivalent are:

- number, accounting, currency, fraction, scientific: converted to R numeric format
- percent: converted to R numeric format, with “percent” attribute
- date: converted to R date or datetime format
- time: converted to R time format
- text: converted to R character format
- general: converted to R character format (unless otherwise asked)

To see how this works in practice:

```
surv=read.xlsx('survey.xlsx', "survey2")
```

```
surv
```

```
##      1  3
## 1 EU US
## 2 10 20
## 3 30 40
```

If the Excel user has not set a specific cell style. All cells have the Excel “general” format and the general format is mapped to R “character”.

Let us assume that the user has explicitly set the values in row 2 and 3 to the Excel number style. Given the previous command

```
surv[[1]]
```

```
## [1] "EU" "10" "30"
```

```
class(surv[[1]])
```

```
## [1] "character"
```

Numeric values 10 and 30 are converted to character to be compatible with the string “EU”.

If you want to reduce the progress messages printed (perhaps because you are using a number of batch jobs), use:

```
suppressMessages( x=read.xlsx('survey.xlsx') )
```

You will only get one line of +’s. I am thinking if it is convenient to totally abolish even this.

## Empty objects

The general principle is: empty objects are not returned unless they are explicitly requested.

```
surv=read.xlsx('survey.xlsx')
names(surv)
```

```
## [1] "Survey1" "Survey2"
```

```
read.xlsx('survey.xlsx', c("survey2", "sheet3"))
```

```
## $survey2
##      1  3
## 1 EU US
## 2 10 20
## 3 30 40
##
## $sheet3
## data frame with 0 columns and 0 rows
```

```
read.xlsx('survey.xlsx', "sheet3")
```

```
## NULL
```

## Dates oddities

Let us assume that you the locale of you Excel is English UK.

In cell A1 you enter the date 20/10/2000. Now this is a legitimate date, because in Britain day comes before month and Excel recognise it as such. In fact if you right-click on cell and select Format->Number you will find that the category is “Date” and in the Locale drop down “English (U.K.)” is selected.

Now let us write in cell A2 the date 10/20/2000. You think you have written a date, but this is UK locale, so this is just an ordinary string. In fact in Format->Number you read that the category is “General”.

You may be tempted to change the category to “Date” and select “English (U.S.)” in the Locale drop down, maybe you will also select a matching type in the Type list.

Unfortunately this keeps being an invalid date cell. In fact, if you type =YEAR(A1) in cell B1, the formula extracts the year part of the date and gives 2000, while writing =YEAR(A2) gives #VALUE! to signaling the wrong date in cell A2.

To understand things better select again Format->Number for cell A1, change Locale drop down set to “English (U.K.)” to “English (U.S.)”. You now see that the value of the displayed in the cell has automatically changed from 20/10/2000 to 10/20/2000, and the formula =YEAR(A1) in B1 still correctly shows 2000.

So a date should be entered always respecting the locale, after you can change the way it is displayed by changing the locale.

How does read.xlsx behave?

1. If a cell contains the value “Charles” and you set its format to date, the conversion value in R will be not surprisingly, NA.

2. If a date is entered not respecting the locale and you *don't try to change its format category to date*, then this is set to the “General” format category. Normally this value will be converted to a character. See ahead for exceptions.
3. If a date is entered not respecting the locale and you change the format category to date. *You have just created a monster*, since this appears as a date to those sharing your culture, the category and locale you set match the entered date, but for Excel it is not a date and it will be stored in the file as a string. When `read.xlsx` finds a string pretending to be a date it imports it as a NA.

With respect to point 2) if you have set the `general` argument of `read.xlsx` to “numeric”, than again the value will be imported as a NA. The same will happen if the prevailing style in the column is “numeric” (or the likes).

If you don't have control on the workbook content, the point 3) can be particularly subtle. You see apparently good looking dates, which are not such for Excel, and you have unpleasant NA surprised after import. Next release of `read.xlsx` will have a guess-date option to address this and get what looks like a date as a date in R too.