

Statistical analysis using Microsoft Excel

Microsoft Excel spreadsheets have become somewhat of a standard for data storage, at least for smaller data sets. This, along with the program often being packaged with new computers, naturally encourages its use for statistical analyses. This is unfortunate, since Excel is most decidedly **not** a statistical package.

Here's an example of how the numerical inaccuracies in Excel can get you into trouble. Consider the following data set:

Data Display

Row	X	Y
1	10000000001	1000000000.000
2	10000000002	1000000000.000
3	10000000003	1000000000.900
4	10000000004	1000000001.100
5	10000000005	1000000001.010
6	10000000006	1000000000.990
7	10000000007	1000000001.100
8	10000000008	1000000000.999
9	10000000009	1000000000.000
10	10000000010	1000000000.001

Here is Minitab output for the regression:

Regression Analysis

The regression equation is

$$Y = 9.71E+08 + 0.0029 X$$

Predictor	Coef	StDev	T	P
Constant	970667056	616256122	1.58	0.154
X	0.00293	0.06163	0.05	0.963

S = 0.5597 R-Sq = 0.0% R-Sq(adj) = 0.0%

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	SS	MS	F	P
Regression	1	0.0007	0.0007	0.00	0.963

Residual Error	8	2.5065	0.3133
Total	9	2.5072	

Now, here are the values obtained when using the regression program available in the Analysis Toolpak of Microsoft Excel 2002 (the same results came from earlier versions of Excel; I will say something about Excel 2003 later):

SUMMARY OUTPUT

Regression Statistics

Multiple R 65535
R Square -0.538274369
Adjusted R Square -0.730558665
Standard Error 0.694331016
Observations 10

ANOVA

	df	SS	MS	F	Signif F
Regression	1	-1.349562541	-1.349562541	-2.799367289	#NUM!
Residual	8	3.85676448	0.48209556		
Total	9	2.507201939			

	Coeff	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	2250000001	0	65535	#NUM!
X Variable 1	-0.125	0	65535	#NUM!

Each of the nine numbers given above is incorrect! The slope estimate has the wrong sign, the estimated standard errors of the coefficients are zero (making it impossible to construct t -statistics), and the values of R^2 , F and the regression sum of squares are **negative**! It's obvious here that the output is garbage (even Excel seems to know this, as the #NUM!'s seem to imply), but what if the numbers that had come out weren't absurd — just wrong? Unless Excel does better at addressing these computational problems, it cannot be considered a serious candidate for use in statistical analysis.

What went wrong here? The summary statistics from Excel give us a clue:

	X		Y
Mean	10000000006	Mean	1000000001
Standard Error	0	Standard Error	6.746192342
Median	10000000006	Median	1000000001

Mode	#N/A	Mode	1000000000
Standard Deviation	0	Standard Deviation	21.33333333
Sample Variance	0	Sample Variance	455.1111111

Here are the corresponding values if the all X values are decreased by 10000000000, and all Y values are decreased by 10000000000. The standard deviations and sample variances should, of course, be identical in the two cases, but they are not (the values below are correct):

	X		Y
Mean	5.5	Mean	0.61
Standard Error	0.957427108	Standard Error	0.166906561
Median	5.5	Median	0.945
Mode	#N/A	Mode	0
Standard Deviation	3.027650354	Standard Deviation	0.527804888
Sample Variance	9.166666667	Sample Variance	0.278578

Thus, simple descriptive statistics are not trustworthy either in situations where the standard deviation is small relative to the absolute level of the data.

Using Excel to analyze multiple regression data brings its own problems. Consider the following data set, provided by Gary Simon:

Y	X1	X2	X3	X4
5.88	1	1	1	1
2.56	6	1	1	1
11.11	1	1	1	1
0.79	6	1	1	1
0.00	6	1	1	1
0.00	0	1	1	1
15.60	8	1	1	1
3.70	4	1	1	1
8.49	3	1	1	1
51.20	6	1	1	1
14.20	7	1	1	1
7.14	5	1	1	1
4.20	7	1	1	1
6.15	4	1	1	1
10.46	6	1	1	1
0.00	8	1	1	1

10.42	2	1	1	1
17.36	5	1	1	1
13.41	8	1	1	1
41.67	0	1	1	1
2.78	0	1	1	1
2.98	8	1	1	1
9.62	7	1	1	1
0.00	0	1	1	1
4.65	5	1	0	2
3.13	3	1	0	2
24.58	6	1	0	2
0.00	1	1	0	2
5.56	4	1	0	2
9.26	3	1	0	2
0.00	0	1	0	2
0.00	0	1	0	2
3.13	1	1	0	2
0.00	0	1	0	2
7.56	5	0	1	3
9.93	6	0	1	3
0.00	8	0	1	3
16.67	6	0	1	3
16.89	7	0	1	3
13.71	6	0	1	3
6.35	5	0	1	3
2.50	3	0	1	3
2.47	7	0	1	3
21.74	3	0	1	3
23.60	8	0	0	4
11.11	8	0	0	4
0.00	7	0	0	4
3.57	8	0	0	4
2.90	5	0	0	4
2.94	3	0	0	4
2.42	8	0	0	4
18.75	4	0	0	4
0.00	5	0	0	4
2.27	3	0	0	4

There is nothing apparently unusual about these data, and they are, in fact, from an actual clinical experiment. Here is output from Excel 2002 (and earlier versions) for a regression of Y on X1, X2, X3, and X4:

SUMMARY OUTPUT

Regression Statistics

Multiple R 0.218341811
 R Square 0.047673146
 Adjusted R Square -0.030067821
 Standard Error 10.23964549
 Observations 54

ANOVA

	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	4	257.1897798	64.29744495	0.613230678	0.655111835
Residual	49	5137.666652	104.8503398		
Total	53	5394.856431			

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	0.384972384	0	65535	#NUM!
X Variable 1	0.386246607	0.570905635	0.6765507	0.501872378
X Variable 2	2.135547339	0	65535	#NUM!
X Variable 3	4.659552583	0	65535	#NUM!
X Variable 4	0.952380952	0	65535	#NUM!

Obviously there's something strange going on here: the intercept and three of the four coefficients have standard error equal to zero, with undefined p -values (why Excel gives what would seem to be t -statistics equal to infinity as 65535 is a different matter!). One coefficient has more sensible-looking output. In any event, Excel does give a fitted regression with associated F -statistic and standard error of the estimate.

Unfortunately, this is all incorrect. There is **no** meaningful regression possible here, because the predictors are perfectly collinear (this was done inadvertently by the clinical researcher). That is, no regression model can be fit using all four predictors. Here is what happens if you try to use Minitab to fit the model:

Regression Analysis

- * X4 is highly correlated with other X variables
- * X4 has been removed from the equation

The regression equation is
 $Y = 4.19 + 0.386 X1 + 0.23 X2 + 3.71 X3$

Predictor	Coef	StDev	T	P
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Constant	4.194	3.975	1.06	0.296
X1	0.3862	0.5652	0.68	0.497
X2	0.231	3.159	0.07	0.942
X3	3.707	2.992	1.24	0.221

S = 10.14 R-Sq = 4.8% R-Sq(adj) = 0.0%

Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	SS	MS	F	P
Regression	3	257.2	85.7	0.83	0.481
Residual Error	50	5137.7	102.8		
Total	53	5394.9			

Minitab correctly notes the perfect collinearity among the four predictors and drops one, allowing the regression to proceed. Which variable is dropped out depends on the order of the predictors given to **Minitab**, but all of the fitted models yield the same R^2 , F , and standard error of the estimate (of these statistics, **Excel** only gets the R^2 right, since it mistakenly thinks that there are four predictors in the model, affecting the other calculations). This is another indication that the numerical methods used by these versions of **Excel** are hopelessly out of date, and cannot be trusted.

These problems have been known in the statistical community for many years, going back to the earliest versions of **Excel**, but new versions of **Excel** continued to be released without them being addressed. Finally, with the release of **Excel** 2003, the basic algorithmic instabilities in the regression function `LINEST()` were addressed, and the software yields correct answers for these regression examples (as well as for the univariate statistics example). **Excel** 2003 also recognizes the perfect collinearity in the previous example, and gives the slope coefficient for one variable as 0 with a standard error of 0 (although it still tries to calculate a t -test, resulting in $t = 65535$).

Unfortunately, not all of **Excel**'s problems were fixed in the latest version. Here is another data set:

X1	X2
1	1
2	2
3	3
4	4

5	5
6	5
7	4
8	3
9	2
10	1

Let's say that these are paired data, and we are interested in whether the population mean for X_1 is different from that of X_2 . Minitab output for a paired sample t -test is as follows:

Paired T-Test and Confidence Interval

Paired T for X1 - X2

	N	Mean	StDev	SE Mean
X1	10	5.500	3.028	0.957
X2	10	3.000	1.491	0.471
Difference	10	2.50	3.37	1.07

95% CI for mean difference: (0.09, 4.91)

T-Test of mean difference = 0 (vs not = 0): T-Value = 2.34

P-Value = 0.044

Here is output from Excel:

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means

	Variable 1	Variable 2
Mean	5.5	3
Variance	9.166666667	2.222222222
Observations	10	10
Pearson Correlation	0	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	9	
t Stat	2.342606428	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.021916376	
t Critical one-tail	1.833113856	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.043832751	
t Critical two-tail	2.262158887	

The output is (basically) the same, of course, as it should be. Now, let's say that the data have a couple of more observations with missing data:

```

X1  X2
 1   1
 2   2
 3   3
 4   4
 5   5
 6   5
 7   4
 8   3
 9   2
10   1
    10
10

```

Obviously, these two additional observations don't provide any information about the difference between $X1$ and $X2$, so they shouldn't change the paired t -test. They don't change the Minitab output, but look at the Excel output:

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means

	Variable 1	Variable 2
Mean	5.909090909	3.636363636
Variance	10.09090909	6.454545455
Observations	11	11
Pearson Correlation	0	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	10	
t Stat	1.357813616	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.1021848282	
t Critical one-tail	1.812461505	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.204369656	
t Critical two-tail	2.228139238	

I don't know what Excel has done here, but it's certainly not right! The statistics for each variable separately (means, variances) are correct, but irrelevant. Interestingly, the results were different (but still wrong) in Excel 97, so apparently a new error was introduced in the later versions of the software, which has still not been corrected. The same results are obtained if the observations with missing data are put in the first two rows, rather than the last two. These are **not** the results that are obtained if the two additional observations are collapsed into one (with no missing data), which are correct:

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means

	Variable 1	Variable 2
Mean	5.909090909	3.636363636
Variance	10.09090909	6.454545455
Observations	11	11
Pearson Correlation	0.35482964	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	10	
t Stat	2.291746243	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.022440088	
t Critical one-tail	1.812461505	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.044880175	
t Critical two-tail	2.228139238	

Missing data can cause other problems in all versions of Excel. For example, if you try to perform a regression using variables with missing data (either in the predictors or target), you get the error message **Regression - LINEST() function returns error. Please check input ranges again.** This means that you would have to cut and paste the variables to new locations, omitting any rows with missing data yourself.

Other, less catastrophic, problems come from using (any version of) Excel to do statistical analysis. Excel requires you to put all predictors in a regression in contiguous columns, requiring repeated reorganizations of the data as different models are fit. Further, the software does not provide any record of what is done, making it virtually impossible to document or duplicate what was done. In addition, you might think that what Excel calls a "Normal probability plot" is a normal (qq) plot of the residuals, but you'd be wrong. In fact, the plot that comes out is a plot of the ordered target values $y_{(i)}$ versus $50(2i - 1)/n$ (the ordered percentiles). That is, it is effectively a plot checking uniformity of the target variable (something of no interest in a regression context), and has nothing to do with

normality at all!

To my way of thinking, the solution to all of these problems is to perform statistical analyses using the appropriate tool — a good statistical package. Many such packages are available, usually with a Windows-type graphical user interface (such as *Minitab*), often costing \$100 or less. A remarkably powerful package, *R*, is free! (See www.r-project.org for information.) If you must do statistical calculations within *Excel*, there are add-on packages available that do not use the *Excel* algorithmic engine, but these can cost as much as many standalone packages, and you must be sure that you trust the designers to have carefully checked their code for problems.

Notes: The document “Using *Excel* for Statistical Data Analysis,” by Eva Goldwater, provided some of the original information used here. The document is available on the World Wide Web at

www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~evagold/excel.html

The United Kingdom Department of Industry’s National Measurement System has produced a report on the inadequacies of the intrinsic mathematical and statistical functions in versions of *Excel* prior to *Excel* 2003. This 1999 report, written by H.R. Cook, M.G. Cox, M.P. Dainton, and P.M. Harris, is available on the World Wide Web at

www.npl.co.uk/ssfm/download/documents/cise27_99.pdf

Some published discussions of the use of *Excel* for statistical calculations are given below. The first reference describes other dangers in using *Excel* (including for purposes for which it is designed!), and gives a link to a document describing how a spreadsheet user can get started using *R*. References (6) and (10) discuss *Excel* 2003, noting remaining problems in its statistical distribution functions, random number generation, and nonlinear regression capabilities.

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