Finding all the records by first letter(s) or number by Cindy O'Hora

Sometimes you want to create a subset of records by challenging criteria. Try finding all the people in your address book whose last name starts with a particular letter. If you use plain Layout .. Find then you'll locate all the names that have that letter in them, as well as, all starting with it. Seems hopeless, doesn't it?

We'll add a calculation field to isolate the first letter of the required field. This will allow you to "Find" in that calculation field for special subsets by first letter.

As always, if this is new for you and you value your database (I always do), I suggest you experiment with a copy of your database rather than the original. If you are happy with the results you can pitch the original or modify it for practice.

Function introduction

This activity calls for the use of the LEFT function. It is LEFT(text,number of characters). It basically says "in this text field or cell, locate the first so many characters from the left." The number of characters is defined by you. Put 1 - then it finds the first character from the left. Put 2 - it finds the first two characters from the left. LEFT('CINDY',1) Finds the first letter a C. LEFT('CINDY',2) locates Ci.

First, we must add the necessary calculation field to the database. Then we can Find the records.

1. Open the database

2. Go Layout ... Define Fields.

3. Enter "First letter" in the Field name box and change the Field Type popup menu to calculation.

4. Click Create.

5. A dialog box will open requesting that you enter the formula for the calculation field. Scroll down the Function box (on the right) until you see the function LEFT(text,number of characters). Click on it . Notice it is automatically entered into the Formula box.

   (I urge you to do it this wway rather than type the Left function to avoid entry errors which will foul up the formula.)

6. Within the LEFT function the word text is highlighted. In the Fields box (on the left side of the dialog box) - Click on Last name. It will automatically be entered correctly in the formula. If you are doing this with a different field (City or state or phone) then choose that one instead. Note that the name of the field is automatically enclosed in single quotes.

7. Highlight the words "number of characters" in the formula and type the number 1. This tells the formula to find the first letter from the left in the field.

   The formula should now read LEFT('Last Name',1)

8. Reset the **Format result as:** to Text.

9. **Click Done.**

   You are now delivered back to your database and a field is added to the bottom of each record. It should contain the first letter of the Last name field. If you get an error message you must carefully review the formula for mistakes.

   Note: If a specific record lacks any data in the Last name field (like a blank record), then you'll get #error in the box for just that record. Once you enter data in the field, the error will be resolved.

To accomplish your specialized Find:

1. Go Layout ... [Find](#).

2. Type the letter you want to locate - like all the M's in the new First letter field. Hit the return key.

3. You'll have all the records of people whose last name starts with the letter M.

   To return to the whole database again Go Arrange ... Show All Records.

When in life would I ever need to know this? My kids love to torment teachers with this question. I think it is a valid one. So here goes....

Suppose you are running a registration for an event. It would be helpful to create subsets of participants. You want to have all the A - L's go to one table and all the M - Z's another.

You can now create individual alphabetical lists for each letter which will endear you to the folks at the registration table and hopefully speed registration.

In fact, you could use my Sort subsummary tip to avoid all the repeat finding for each letter.

✦ Suppose you have entered phone numbers (including area code) all in one field. You need to find all the folks in one area code. A field calculating LEFT('phone',3) would isolate them in no time. (Where 'phone' is the name used in the database for the phone number field.) Remember when I told you to put data in spearate fields? I know - nag, nag, nag. But if you had entered the area code in its own field, you would not need this tip!

"We must always change, renew, rejuvenate our selves; otherwise, we harden." ~ Goethe

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