ChatGPT Part 4: Working with Files and Data

A spreadsheet can hold the answer to a business question, but only if the question reaches it. ChatGPT can read an uploaded file, then count, compare and summarise what is inside, yet the result is only as good as the file and the request. Four steps make the work reliable: prepare, ask, inspect and share. Each step answers one simple question. In this part, Karim, an operations manager at a food distributor, builds a delivery report for Monday's review.

1. Prepare

A clean file gives a clean answer. Before uploading, we keep only the sheet that holds the task, with a clear header row, one record on each row and plain column names. We delete unrelated tabs, duplicate rows and personal details that the question does not need, and we keep the original file untouched. The question is: does this file contain only what the task needs? ChatGPT works from what it is given, so a crowded workbook invites a confused answer.

Example: A shop owner exports a full year of sales to review one product line. She uses the Prepare question: does this file contain only what the task needs? She keeps the product, date and amount columns, and leaves the supplier details in the original file.

At work: Karim's delivery workbook has three tabs: deliveries, drivers and prices. He uses the Prepare question: does this file contain only what the task needs? He copies the deliveries tab into a new file, deletes the driver names and phone numbers, and keeps the original workbook untouched. Now ChatGPT sees only route, date, status and delay reason.

2. Ask

The file does not explain what we want to know. So we name the sheet and the columns to use, say what to do with them, and describe how the answer should look. The question is: what exactly should ChatGPT find, and in what form? We also say how to treat blank cells and duplicate rows, and we ask it to list its assumptions. Without these limits, it fills every gap with a polite guess.

Example: A school administrator uploads a list of room bookings. She uses the Ask question: what exactly should ChatGPT find, and in what form? She asks for the rooms that were booked twice at the same hour, as a short table with the room and the hour.

At work, the wrong way: Karim types one line, analyse this file and tell me what is wrong. ChatGPT replies with a general summary about traffic, weather and communication, and not a single route is named. It sounds confident, yet his director cannot act on one line of it.

At work, the right way: Karim uses the Ask question and names the sheet, the columns, the task, the gaps and the format. ChatGPT now returns late deliveries by route and by reason, with the blank reasons listed apart. Every finding points to rows that his director can open.

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3. Inspect

A confident table is not a checked table. Before any number leaves the chat, we ask ChatGPT which rows it counted and how it handled the blank cells. Then we compare its totals with the source file, using a small sample of rows. The question is: can we trace each number back to a row? If the method is unclear, we correct the request and compare again.

Example: A clinic manager asks for the appointments that patients missed last month. She uses the Inspect question: can we trace each number back to a row? She opens a few sample rows and finds that cancelled visits were counted as missed.

At work: ChatGPT reports that the north route has the most late deliveries. Karim uses the Inspect question: can we trace each number back to a row? He asks which rows were counted as late and how blank status cells were treated, then checks a few of them in the original file. Blank cells were counted as late, so he asks for known statuses and blanks on separate lines, and the north route drops to second place behind the east route.

4. Share

The last step is to share only what the audience needs. Before a sensitive file is uploaded, we check the account settings and the company rules, because data controls differ between accounts and plans. We share the smallest useful result, such as totals by route, and leave out names and contact details. We call it an analysis of the supplied file, never an audit. The question is: what is the smallest output that still supports the decision?

Example: A recruiter wants to show hiring progress to the department heads. She uses the Share question: what is the smallest output that still supports the decision? She shares the totals by department and leaves out every candidate's name.

At work: Karim prepares the page for the Monday review. He uses the Share question: what is the smallest output that still supports the decision? He sends a table of late deliveries by route and reason, with no driver or customer names, and a note that states the sheet and the period it covers. The director sees the problem clearly, and the personal data stays in the original file.

Conclusion

In summary, working with files and data takes four steps: prepare the file, ask a precise question, inspect the numbers and share the smallest useful result. ChatGPT counts and compares quickly, but it cannot know what we meant, and it cannot check itself against our records. Before any number reaches a meeting, the key question is simple: could we show the rows behind it?

Sources

- OpenAI Help Center: Data analysis with ChatGPT (supported spreadsheet formats; clear header row, one record per row, plain column names) – https://help.openai.com/en/articles/8437071-data-analysis-with-chatgpt
- OpenAI Help Center: File uploads FAQ (uploading files to ChatGPT) – https://help.openai.com/en/articles/8555545-file-uploads-faq
- OpenAI Help Center: Data controls in ChatGPT (account settings for how conversations and files are used) – https://help.openai.com/en/articles/7730893-data-controls-in-chatgpt

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