

Contracts and Specs à la Carte

by Craig Savage

If I had to choose only one application for my business, it would be a spreadsheet. Besides performing math calculations on rows and columns of numbers, today's spreadsheets can store and retrieve records like a database, format documents and graphics like a word processor, and produce outlines and time lines like a scheduling program.



Spec Writer (\$195; as an add-on to MacNail or Bid Magic, \$100) is available for both Windows and Mac. For information, contact Turtle Creek Software, 118 Prospect St., Ithaca, NY 14850; 607/272-1008.

Over the years, the best use of spreadsheets I've seen has come from Turtle Creek Software. The company started out

with a Macintosh product called MacNail, which uses a set of templates for the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (both Mac and Windows versions). The latest version of MacNail can perform estimates, calculate payroll, track job costs, schedule jobs, and create material lists — in short, it can practically run your company.

A new addition to Turtle Creek's construction software product line is called **Spec Writer**. This macro-driven Excel template uses a database of common phrases and clauses to build custom contracts and specifications. Each document can be formatted to look any way you like, then printed on your company's letterhead.

Boilerplate. Spec Writer provides a series of choices in scrollable menus, such as the ones for headers and footers in the "New Contracts" window (Figure 1, next page). Headers and footers are legal "boilerplate" suitable

for the beginning and end of a document, respectively. You can choose as many header and footer files as you need, then send them to either the spreadsheet or a word processor.

Other file menus, such as those for "Stock Clauses" and "Specifications," provide a variety of descriptions of different project types and schedules as well as specific item descriptions that apply to labor, materials, and subs. All of the phrases can be edited, and new phrases can be built using a system of point-and-click menus.

The way the program stores and assembles these phrases is really quite ingenious. Instead of storing complete sentences and paragraphs to cover every possible variation, Spec Writer stores sentence fragments, like "in the event of" and "by contractor." The fragments are then assembled using something called "smart grammar," which is easier to use than to explain. But the bottom line is that smart grammar works. It handles construction quantities and plurals accurately, and it creates a smooth mix of sentence styles throughout each document. Smart grammar also gives you opportunities to include prices, allowances, and other options.

Custom language. Spec Writer provides a standard spreadsheet template that can be used to create new contract and specification language, and to edit existing clauses (Figure 2). Each spreadsheet row stores a separate clause, and each column stores discrete information used to assemble the clause.

For example, the *who* column stores the subject of the clause; the *verb* column stores the action words; the *noun* column stores the object of the verb, and so on. Columns labeled *details* and *extras* hold fragments describing when, where, and how. To create a sentence like "All holes in the wall will be filled by contractor," the entries on the spreadsheet would

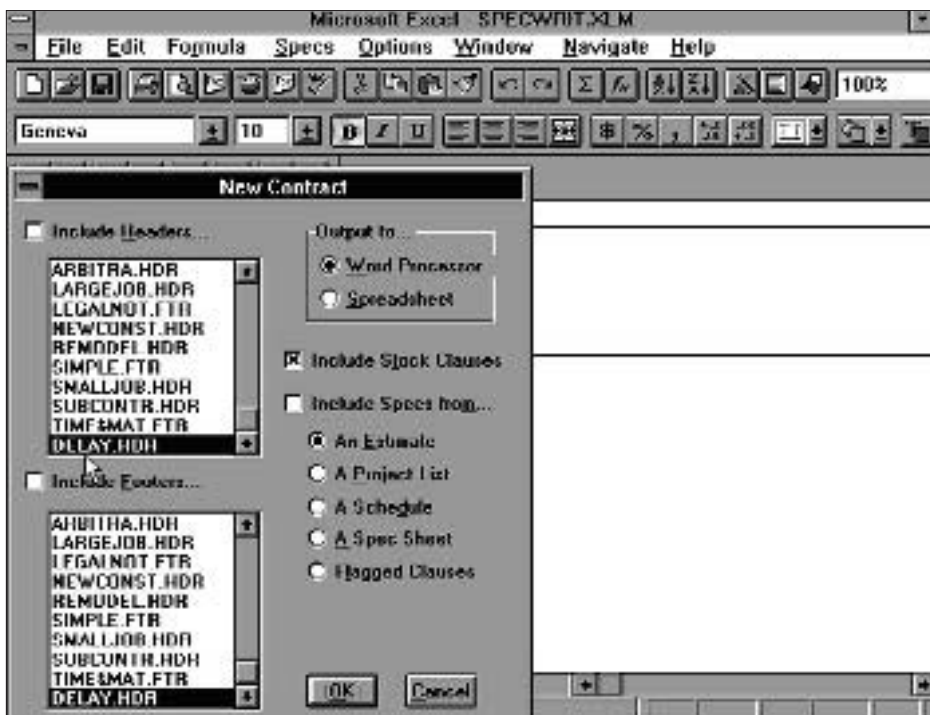


Figure 1. Spec Writer uses a Microsoft Excel template to build custom contracts and specifications. Standard legal language, called "headers" and "footers," can be selected from scrollable menus, then combined with "Stock Clauses" to make a complete document.

be as follows:

- who — contractor
- verb — fill
- noun — hole
- details — in the wall

Spec Writer automatically fills in the blanks of the grammatical structure depending on which of six styles you choose in the *phrase* column. An alternative arrangement of these fragments, for instance, could read “Contractor shall fill all holes in the wall.” The completed phrase is displayed in a separate window so you can see how it reads.

Spec Writer works alone, or in conjunction with MacNail and Bid Magic. As far as I know, the program is unique, and I recommend it to anyone who writes a lot of specs and contracts as a part of their routine. ■

Craig Savage, a longtime builder and computer user, owns Savage Co., in Carpinteria, Calif., and publishes the Macintosh Construction Forum and Window On Construction newsletters.

If you have a question about computing in construction, address it to State-of-the-Art Contractor, JLC, RR 2, Box 146, Richmond, VT 05477.

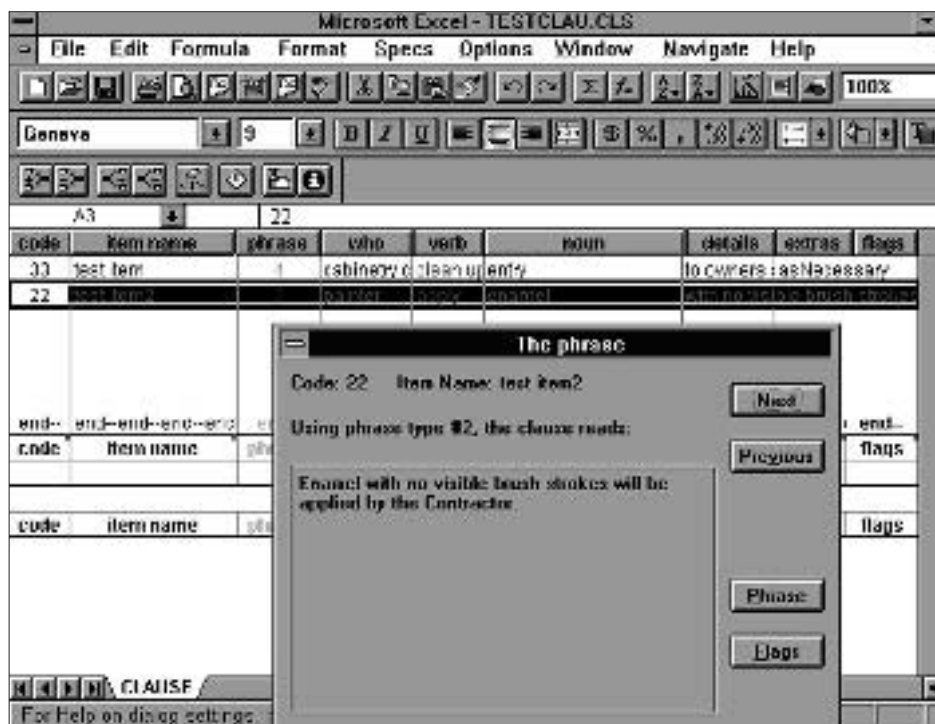


Figure 2. Standard language can be created and modified in a spreadsheet template that stores discrete sentence fragments. The program uses “smart grammar” to put the fragments together into coherent clauses. Sentence structure can vary among six different styles, each of which is displayed to show how it will read.