
FAQ

The first three and a half pages of this FAQ are printed in the book: thereafter the FAQ continues with much background information about how and why I came to build the book.

Q Why an FAQ and not an Introduction?

Good question. Most introductions consist of the explanations that the author feels are vital to get the best out of the book. Most introductions are never read. But people do (hopefully) read FAQs.

I've tried to keep this one relatively short, but there is a more extensive FAQ on the website if you are interested in how the book was put together. This is, of course, of enormous interest to the author (who had to do all the work) but probably boring to most people.

www.Penguinsoft.co.uk

Q Where did the material for the book originate?

What a great question. I've been writing the database column in a fine UK publication called Personal Computer World (PCW to its friends) for very nearly 15 years. In April 2008 PCW celebrated 30 years of publishing, an incredible achievement for a computing magazine. I decided to celebrate the anniversary in a minor way but publishing selected material from the database column.

Q Didn't the editor mind?

The current incumbent of the noble post, the indomitable Kelvin Taylor, was delighted and, as always, highly supportive. I realise that this sounds like the worst kind of sycophancy but the truth is that I have been writing the column for so long, not just for the money, but because I have a genuine affection for the magazine, the people who work there and the readers.

Q Are you going to split the FAQ up into sections?

Yes. The most important one is "How do I find stuff in/for the book?"

FAQ How do I find stuff in/for the book?

Q And where do I find that one?

You are already in it.

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Q OK, how do I find stuff in/for the book?

I wrote the book as columns in Personal Computer World. Each column usually consisted of several separate components which I have separated and called Articles in this book. There are about 140 of them. They are organised into groups:

- Access specific
 1. Introductory
 2. Intermediate
 3. Introduction to Programming
 4. Programming
- Database general
 1. Introductory
 2. Intermediate
 3. Advanced
- Date and Time
- Sorting and Ordering
- Mixed Bag

Within each group the articles are essentially unordered – that is to say they are usually in chronological order, which has no real significance. So, dip in wherever you like and start reading, or use the database called EDS that's on the website.

Q Why does the book need its own database?

As I started to roughly grouping the related articles together I found that many articles could be fitted into several categories. For example, there is an article called "Understanding Yes/No Fields" which is in the Access specific part of the book but is also highly relevant to both form design and formatting.

Given that this is a book about databases it was almost inevitable that I'd create a database to solve the problem. Here you'll find 27 different classifications of the articles, for example:

- Nulls
- Yes/No
- Input masks
- etc.

You can query the database and find the names of the articles relevant to a particular topic. You can, of course, modify the database to your own ends, adding your own classifications. Or you can ignore it completely. The book works either way.

Q Doesn't the book have a normal index at the back?

Yes, it has one of those as well. The database idea was just a bit of fun.

Q Are there sample databases for the articles?

Yes, about 70 of them. They are on the website.

Q How do I know which sample file goes with which article?

The name of the file matches the name of the article.

FAQ How up to date is the material?**Q Aren't some of the MDBs out of date by now?**

No, they have all been upgraded to Access 2000/2003. I ran them all under Access 2003 but left the file format in Access 2000. That way they should be readable by any current version. I also retook every single screen shot (150 of them) so that they show a modern version of Access.

Q Why not use Access 2007?

The uptake of 2007 has been slow so far. However if and when it starts to be used I can do an upgrade fairly easily now that the material has been reorganised.

Q OK, but aren't the references in the articles going to be out of date?

No, because I went through every single article and rewrote them for modern times. So, for example, Access has an Autonumber field that used to be called a 'Counter' field. The early articles obviously use the term Counter so I have updated them to the new term.

In addition, I checked all of the descriptions of processes (such as following menu options) and rewrote them to ensure that they work in Access 2003. So, some of the early article were written about Access 1.0 but the samples you get and the description of how to solve the problem are built to run in Access 2003.

Q All of them?

Yes.

Q Doesn't that introduce apparent anomalies?

Well spotted. For example an article written in July 1997 shows you how to set an Access file to automatically start in Windows XP – several years before the operating system was written. But then the original article shows you how to start the same file under NT, an operating system not much used today. The point is really that the general question "How do I get an Access file to autostart?" was as relevant in 1997 as it is today; only the detail of the answer has changed.

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Q What about the Access specific code?

I imported it into an Access 2000 format MDB and ran it under Access 2003. If it ran OK I left it alone, if not, I modified it until it did. To the credit of Microsoft, very little of it needed to be modified.

Q What are the italicised words that occur in some of the articles?

Just occasionally, it seemed worth commenting on some aspect of a particular article. So, comments that appear in the articles but were made in the present (2008), *are shown in italics*.

However this applies only to direct comments and not the edits that were made to bring it up to date.

Q This FAQ is fantastic! I want to read more! I want to know how you put the book together, how you chose the material to include...

Ok, I admit it, I made that question up. The problem is that authors love writing about the process of writing; it is, after all, what they do. So I have written more about the processes of turning about 330,000 words into the book you see. However I am also painfully aware that, as the kind purchaser of the book, you are paying for each page. Why should your money be spent on feeding the ego of the author?

Here starts the further FAQ: if you want more detail about some of the topics touched on above, plus some entirely new facts, read on.

Q OK, is this the book for me?

Yes, yes, yes, buy it now. Oh, I see; you want a more considered approach. The database column has been running for about 15 years now. Over the years it has:

- Explained how to use Access
- Explained all sorts of aspects of the relational model
- Answered many Access-specific questions for people
- Answered many generic database questions for people

However for this book I have stripped out most of the material that fits into the first two categories.

Q Why would you do a thing like that?

Because I have two existing books:

Accessible Access 2003

Inside Relational Databases (with examples in Access)

These cover much the same ground and it seemed pointless to duplicate that material in a third book.

Q You're trying to sell me more books?

I would be delighted if you bought either or both of those. But you shouldn't buy this one if the two above contain the kind of material you were hoping for.

Q So what 's in this one?

It's mainly a series of questions from readers and answers (each one called an 'article'). There are also more general articles - about 140 in total. Some are very short others are much larger. The long ones of course, don't just answer the question, they expand the topic. One great aspect of writing the column for so long is that it gives you a feel for the topics that keep on resurfacing every couple of years.

Q I'm new to databases, is it for me?

The readership of the column varies from people new to the subject to database professionals, there is something for everyone. However bear in mind that this also guarantees that some sections of the book will not interest you immediately.

Q So you're telling me that parts of this book will be useless to me?

Yes. No matter who you are you should find some of it interesting. But if you are a professional the introductory stuff will be too easy for you; if you are new to databases the complex stuff will not interest you (yet, although it may in future)

Q You aren't doing a great sales job here.

I suppose I'm trying to be realistic. But I still think the book is worth buying, otherwise I wouldn't have written it. Think about it this way. The average technical person is paid something in the order of 20 GBP per hour at work (assuming 35K GBP per annum and 220 working days per year). I reckon if this book answers just one of your questions, it should save you an hour - which is about the cost of the book. If it answers 5, you are well ahead.

And I do put my money where my sales-patter is. I buy a great number of books. I love them but I rarely expect to use (or even read) all of a technical book. I read the bits that help me.

Q I'm an Access user, is it a good book for me?

Sure. Some of the questions are Access specific, others are about databases in general. Both apply to Access users.

Q I'm not an Access user, is it any good for me?

I'd be lying if I said it was **as** useful as it is for Access users, so I'll give you the figures. The book has nearly 80,000 words. About 20,000 are specific to Access, so

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just over a quarter of the book is not much use to you. But the argument is still as above.

Q Why do you want to publish the database column as a book?

For the money of course. Well, it's probably the answer most people expect, so why not start there? The awful truth is that writing books is clearly extremely profitable if you are J K Rowling. Sadly database books don't sell in quite the same numbers. Trust me, in terms of pay-per-hour, it is certainly not for the money. So, if not for pecuniary advantage, it must be for the fun; and it is. I've gained huge enjoyment from writing the column over the years; indeed writing it is one of the highlights of my month (OK, so I don't get out all that much). Much of the material is still relevant today, but is hidden away in my archive, serving no useful purpose except to eat up disk space. Organising the material as a book seemed like an interesting challenge; and so it proved to be...

Q How do you turn 15 years worth of database columns into a book?

With great care. Each column is between 1,600 and 2,000 words long. There are about 180 of them.

Q What's the difference between a column and an article?

The columns were usually split up into between two and five items: let's call them articles to distinguish them from the column. Once I started looking it became apparent that there were, more or less, four classes of article.

Q Really! Tell me about those four different classes of article?

1

Discussions about, and explanations of, the relational database model. These featured quite heavily in the early years and are, on the face of it, a potentially rich source of material for this book. However, about ten years ago I collected some of that material (and a great deal more) into a book called *Inside Relational Databases*. I did so because it was clear to me that there was a need for such a book and so it has proved; the book is now in its third edition and selling well. There seemed little point in duplicating the ideas covered in that book in this one so, with some regret, that material was thrown away as well. However, the good news from your point of view is that if you were hoping to find that kind of material, it is already available.

2

News and comment— in the main this was as exciting as last year's tapioca – cold, rubbery and with a skin. I threw most of it away. However some of it was either relevant or, I felt, threw an interesting or amusing sidelight on something database related. So I included it.

3

Access specific questions, answers, tips and trick. Access was released just before I started writing the column. It rapidly became the database of choice for the majority of readers, so the column has always had an Access flavour.

4

General database questions, answers, tips and tricks. Not all readers use Access. In addition, many of the questions from Access readers were actually generic questions about databases. Wherever possible I have always tried to give a generic, rather than an Access specific answer.

Q How many of your precious words were lost?

A I started with about 180 articles, each between 1,600 and 2,200 words – about a third of a million words. About two thirds of those were lost in the process described above, still leaving about 110,000. A rough calculation showed that using the material up to the end of 2001 gave about 75,000 words – a comfortable book size, so that's what I've used.

It was my fervent hope, at that point, to simply be able to publish the remaining articles without re-working them. This, I argued, would give the book a column-like flavour, an immediacy, a raw edge that would appeal to... yes, I was deluding myself in the hopes of an easy fix. There are three reasons why it doesn't work.

Q Why didn't you just publish the articles as they originally appeared?

Three reasons.

The first is that there is a temporal shift that inevitably occurs. Suppose someone sends me a question and I publish the reply in March. By the time it appears in print, I have already written the April issue. Someone reads the March issue and emails in with:

A a better answer (it does happen!)

B a relevant comment

C a related, but slightly different problem

In order for that to make sense in the June column, I have to publish a quick synopsis of the problem and answer from March because it is unreasonable to expect the reader to have the March column to hand.

So, if the book consisted of the unedited columns in chronological order, the reader of the book has to fast forward to see if there was any follow up; even worse, they have to put up with reading all of the synopses that are now redundant because all the columns are together.

The second is that some problems come up time and time again. Since the column has been running for 15 years and it is reasonable to expect the readership to vary over that time, I have covered the same topics more than once. This is fine in a

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long-running column but tedious in a book; so weeding out the duplicates also seemed worthwhile.

Thirdly remember that these are all real questions sent in by real people. The problem here is that the simplicity of the solution may be masked by the surrounding clutter. For example, I was once asked to help a teacher who wanted to count the number times his pupils attended. For reasons which were never clear, he divided the week into three parts. I have no doubt that he had an excellent reason for doing so, but it is a very unusually division and consequently confused the answer. Furthermore, people often choose column and table names which are long and complex.

Of course, when I write in the column, I am trying to serve two readers; the person who sent in the question and the general reader. The former wants to see his/her exactly question, complete with the familiar table and column names solved. The general reader is better served if everything is stripped down to the bare essentials so that the problem and the solution stand out.

Happily the reader who sent in the question has long been satisfied, so in the book I was able to simplify the questions and solutions considerably. I was also able to extend the answers, covering more ground than was possible in the original magazine format with its inevitable tightly proscribed allocation of words.

Q Why have you removed the names of the readers who contributed to the articles?

Once I'd decided that reworking the articles would make it of the greatest possible use to readers, I found I was, in effect, re-writing history and putting new words into the mouths (or emails) of my esteemed contributors.

I realised there was a parallel problem when I happened to corresponded with an early contributor to the column. When he submitted the question he was an enthusiastic amateur, now he is a project leader for a large enterprise. I told him about the book and he emailed back, asking if I could not mention his name. He felt that, in retrospect, his early questions were very naive and not appropriate for a person in his position to be seen to have asked.

Well, of course everyone has to learn this stuff at some time. None of us were born fully conversant with the relational model (although some do, apparently, claim to have uttered their first words in SQL). However, I also had no intention of causing him distress.

Eventually the step of divorcing the names of the contributors from the questions seemed the best means of ensuring that no one was inconvenienced, embarrassed or upset by being cited as asking something they didn't. I know I don't like to be misquoted and I'm sure I'm not alone. Contributors are the lifeblood of the database column and my motivation was genuinely to try to act in their best interests: I hope the decision meets with their approval.

In the end I decided to make the articles anonymous and include a section that names as many people as I can. This seemed the fairest way to proceed. If I have missed anyone out I am truly sorry.

Q Any exceptions?

There are two exceptions – both of whom have given permission for their names to be used.

Ken Sheridan has made huge contributions to the column over the years always answering questions rather than asking them. And it isn't just the database column, type his name into Google to see how much time and effort he puts in to helping other people.

Jonny Black was one of my students when I taught at Dundee University. He helped me with a number of projects there and also wrote a fiendishly interesting Access database that investigates the Access system tables. He was kind enough to allow me to publish this in the column. See the article entitled "Digging in the data dictionary".

Q So, it's a book, not a collection of articles?

(Hey look, this is an FAQ. These are supposed to be questions, not statements with question marks!)

One answer was to re-write all the material and structure it as a normal book. The problem then is that you destroy all the flavour and character of the column that the book is supposed to be celebrating in the first place. One of the delights (hopefully) of the column is that it is written in small, digestible, stand-alone, articles.

So I decided to leave them as stand alone articles; to roughly group the related articles together; but not to try to turn them into a story. The only problem with this approach is that many articles could be fitted into several categories. For example, there is an article called "Understanding Yes/No Fields" which is in the section about Access specific part of the book but is also highly relevant to form design and formatting. But then I devised a cunning plan.

Q Let me guess, you decided to use a database.

That is definitely not a question, frequently asked, or not; it doesn't even have a question mark!

However the answer is that I did decide to use a database. The articles have been classified into just under 60 cross-referenced classifications.

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That should make it easier to find related articles. In addition, of course, the book also has a version on paper at the back.

Q is it safe to apply what I have learn to my own databases?

Always, always, work first with sample data, never the live production data. I say this frequently in the column and it is repetitive to repeat it every time, so I'll say it once but in uppercase because it is very important. ALWAYS WORK WITH COPIES OF THE DATA UNTIL YOU ARE ABSOLUTLEY SURE YOU KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING. THEN, ALWAYS TAKE A BACKUP BEFORE YOU ACTUALLY CHANGE THE DATA IN YOUR PRODUCTION DATABASE. TAKE TWO BACKUPS, TAKE THREE.

Q Why are you shouting?

Sorry. But backups are cheap, mistakes are expensive. A mistake made on a copy of the data isn't a mistake, it is a life enhancing, learning experience that should be treasured and shared. You can boast to you friends "Hey, guess what? I accidentally deleted all our customer records today! Lucky I was working on a backup! What an idiot! That'll teach me to be careful about issuing a DROP TABLE statement!" It becomes a funny story which is so much more amusing than "Honey, it wasn't my fault I got fired! I think deleting all the customer records only warrants a written warning."

Q OK, OK. You've made the point.

Definitely not a question.

Q Fair enough.

So, are you going to buy the book?

Q Hey, I ask the questions around here.....