

Control Your Mac with Your Voice

by Kris Fong



WHAT YOU NEED

- Mac OS X
- Microphone, built-in or external



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK MADEO

Feeling powerless? Boss around your Mac—you may be surprised to find how often it'll obey.

We humans are a bossy breed. When it comes to getting what we want—whether it's combo meal number 5 with pickles and onions on the side, green M&M's, or *MacAddict* Disc sleeves—we voice our demands and expect to get what we want (well, some of the time). If you thrive on barking out orders, you can apply your doggedness to your relationship with your Mac.

Plenty of you already know that Apple built speech technology into earlier versions of the Mac OS so that users could verbally control some of their Macs' actions. But few have tried it for fear

of frustration or failure. Thankfully, Apple's Mac OS X Speech Recognition is easy to get up and running, and it doesn't require that you train it to understand spoken commands. It does, however, require some patience to perfect your speech delivery so your Mac can comprehend what you're saying.

If your mousing hand or fingers need a little rest—or if you just want to impress your sci-fi geek friends—here's how to set up your Mac for speech recognition and how to create your own custom commands. We used Mac OS 10.2—if you're using an earlier OS, it's easy to apply our instructions to your OS.

1 Enable Speech Recognition

You've gotta turn it on to make it work. Open System Preferences and click Speech to display its options. Click the Speech Recognition tab, and then click the On/Off tab.

Select the On radio button to enable Speech Recognition; a round, floating feedback window appears on your desktop. This window allows you to monitor the volume levels picked up by your microphone and displays text feedback when it understands a spoken command.



Just click the On radio button to turn on Speech Recognition. A float-above-everything, round feedback window lets you know it's running.

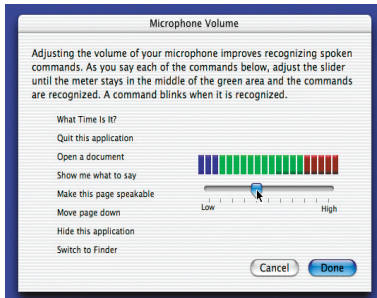
2 Have It Your Way

Click the Listening tab and choose whether you want your Mac to respond to commands only when you hold down a key and speak (select Listen Only While Key Is Pressed) or anytime its listening mode is turned on (select Key Toggles Listening On And Off). We picked the latter so we could speak without pressing anything. If you do the same, type a name for your computer in the Name field (not required for key-press listening)—speak this name to alert your Mac of an impending voice command. From the Name Is pop-up, select whether you want to preface each command with your computer's name, have it as an option, or require it after a certain amount of time lapses between commands. To avoid inadvertently commanding your Mac to do something when you're, say, talking to your cat, select Required Before Each Command. To change the default activation key (Escape), click Change Key. In the dialog that appears, use your keyboard to select any listed key and click OK. Then select your microphone input from the Microphone pop-up menu.



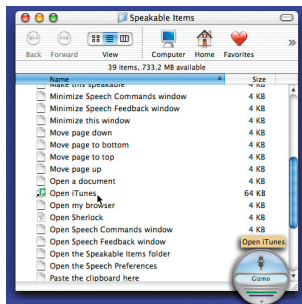
We selected our built-in mic from the Microphone pop-up window—note the feedback window's active volume-bar display.

3 Control the Volume To avoid problems, gauge your mic input volume: Activate listening as determined by your Listening Method choice, and then say anything that isn't a command, such as your name. Watch the feedback window's colored bars—they should display green as you speak. If your volume level is too low (blue bar) or too high (red bar), click Volume. In the resulting window, speak one of the commands listed and adjust the volume slider so that the levels are green. The command will blink if your Mac understands what you said. Then click Done, and you're ready to go.



For best results, adjust the volume slider while speaking until your vocalizations keep the bars in the green.

5 Create Custom Launching Orders With Apple's presets, you can perform mundane tasks such as emptying the Trash, creating new folders, getting mail, saving files, and more—including getting your Mac to tell you a knock-knock joke (though ours failed to deliver a punch line 50 percent of the time). But for ultimate control, create your own commands. To create one that launches a specific file, folder, Web site, or app, make an alias of the item (Command-L) and drag it into your Speakable Items folder (say "Show me what to say" to open it). Then rename the alias as a command by typing *Open* followed by the item name. For example, we renamed our iTunes alias *Open iTunes*. Wait about 15 to 20 seconds for your Mac to settle in with the new command, and then test it by speaking it. Repeat for any other app, file, or folder you want to open verbally.



If you want to open any file, folder, URL, or app verbally, stick an alias of the item into the Speakable Items folder, and rename the file with its spoken command.

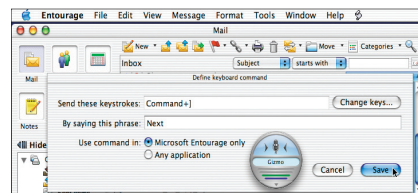
4 Command Your Mac Your Mac comes with a slew of preprogrammed commands. To see a complete list, click the On/Off tab and click Open Speakable Items Folder. To test one out, ask your Mac "What time is it?" in your normal voice (don't forget to say your Mac's name first if you chose that option). If your Mac understands, your question will appear above the feedback window and your Mac will tell you the time. Turn down your stereo, TV, and so on when speaking—background noise can cause your Mac to perform unwanted commands (something in Jay Leno's monologue made our Mac suddenly want to log us out). If you don't want to



remember exact command phrases, click the Commands tab and uncheck Require Exact Wording Of Speakable Item Command Names; this allows you to give voice commands that are similar to the real deal (such as "Gimme the time"—yes, this does work).


If your Mac understands your orders, it displays your command or question above the feedback window.

6 Customize Menu Commands Although the presets provide some common menu commands to copy, paste, hide apps, and more, there are other tasks we wanted to perform without repetitive keystrokes or mouse clicks. No problem—we can create custom voice commands for just about any menu command. To do this, launch an app and pick a menu command (we chose Microsoft Entourage's Next command so we could step through email using our voice). Then tell your Mac, "Define a keyboard command." A dialog opens, asking for a key combination—press the keys that correspond to your menu command (we pressed Command-]), and click OK. In the underlying dialog, type an appropriate verbal command for your menu item in the By Saying This Phrase field.



Because we were tired of clicking through each email entry, we created a voice command for Entourage's Next command.

Then choose to use the command either within the specific app or systemwide, and click Save. Speak the command to test it out. Then repeat for other commands.

 Kris Fong wishes that people were as compliant with her every demand as her Mac is.

TIPS FOR TALKERS

Step Away from the Mic Unlike recording apps, Speech Recognition works best when you're about 2 feet away from your mic.

Speak Normally Don't shout or speak like a robot when delivering commands. Speak like you would in a conversation with someone.

Pause After Getting Your Mac's Attention When addressing your Mac by name, wait one second before delivering your command.