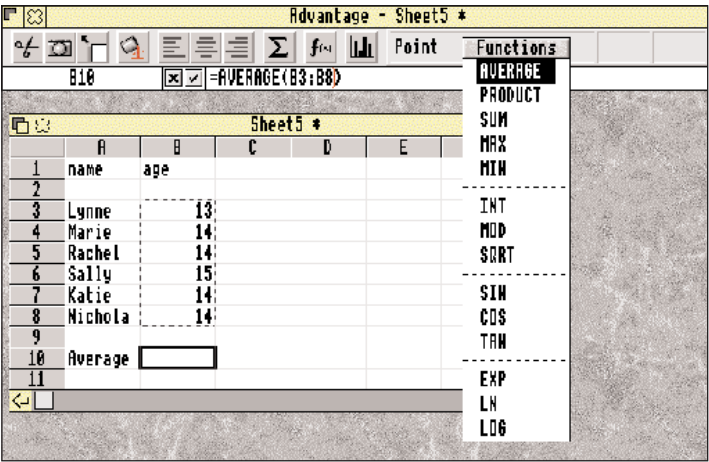


The Advantage of Spreadsheets

Mark Sealey looks with enthusiasm at a spreadsheet aimed squarely at the educational market, Longman Logotron s

Advantage is the new spreadsheet from Longman Logotron. It has been designed to allow pupils (typically in key stages two, three and four) to concentrate on the relevant mathematics - not the particularities of the software that they are using.



There are now several Figure 2.

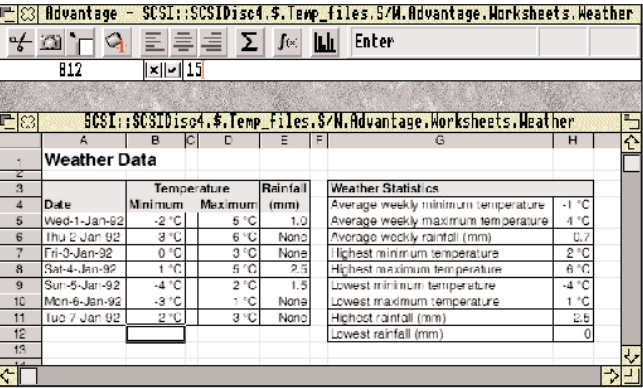


Figure 1. The two-window approach of Advantage.

contenders for fheavy duty* spreadsheet work, Pipedream 4, Resultz and Fireworkz (Colton), Schema 2 (Clares), the relevant module in Advance (Acom) and Longman Logotron s own Eureka, on which Advantage is obviously based (see the comparative survey in RISC User 7:6). Although the largest Advantage sheet can be 16,384 rows deep by just 256 columns wide, most schools should find this enough!

Much thought has gone into the way that the

user interacts with Advantage. It is assumed that they will want mainly to process data and display it in basic chart forms, crunch numbers (albeit fairly modestly) and ask those all-important fwhat if?* questions.

The thinking behind Advantage is that the pupils must be encouraged to do this, as effortlessly as possible, without depriving them of features. It is for this reason that some measure of intelligence

is built into Advantage so that it works with, not against you (for example, by formatting data as it is entered and sizing the sheet automatically to print).

USING ADVANTAGE

Unusually, clicking on the icon on the icon bar opens two separate windows: the worksheet window and the control window (see figure 1). The latter has a tool bar with 10 icons and status details to the right. Given Advantage s relative sophistication, this style of information display is a good compromise, and immediately makes you want to use the product: there is no clutter. The menu that opens over the sheet window displays a total of no more than seven headings, yielding fewer than three dozen options in all, plus associated dialogue boxes.

All of these are straightforward to use; the most common (except print and save) are duplicated on the tool bar. Most have keyboard alternatives. But it is a pity, given the need to let some (perhaps figure-phobic) spreadsheet first-

timers in gently, that this button bar cannot be configured incrementally as is the case with the same publisher's Pendown word processor.

Helpfully, the designers of Advantage have adopted a five-cursor system to show clearly what it is doing at any one time. Use of the cursor, in fact, is a very important aspect of working with Advantage; short of displaying icons on screen for the digits 0-9 and letters A-Z to click on, virtually everything (including column resizing) can be done with the mouse pointer, and tick icons confirm or cancel data entry, for example (see figure 1).

CHARTS

Just six types of chart are possible. Where appropriate, the data can be displayed stacked, and there are options to show series as percentages, and to put in the connecting lines between points in scatter graphs. Usefully, Advantage treats a chart as a separate object to be saved and printed in its own right. Again, most aspects of a chart's style can be controlled to facilitate interpretation - the font and size etc. of a legend, the palette and axes. Grids can be employed to this end as well.

Even though Advantage does not have so comprehensive a set of chart types as Eureka, for instance, pupils can learn how to maximise the impact of their work and graduate in due course to the more advanced package if necessary.

FUNCTIONS AND FORMULAE

Advantage has nearly a hundred functions. Although many of these (periodic compound interest and modified internal return rate, for instance) may not be used in the course of normal school work, their presence is not intrusive. Most, in fact, can only be accessed from the fPaste Function* dialogue box (i.e. they can only be used in a formula).

Once again, control of functions is almost exclusively by means of the mouse (see figure 2). Click on the cell where the result

is to go, then on the function icon on the tool bar (if you want one of the 14 most common) and choose it from the menu. A caret is placed inside brackets in the entry area. Select the cell (or cells) by clicking (or dragging). A dotted marker shows the zone that you have selected. When happy, click on the tick icon.

The use of functions is intimately bound up with formulae; reading about their use in the manual is consequently a little confusing. Formulae must each begin with an equals sign =, and operation is straightforward. A real boon is being able to attach a name to a formula so that a pupil working in a commercial environment could reinvoke the ubiquitous = (cell)*117.5/100 formula simply by naming it VAT.

DISPLAY

Longman Logotron has gone for a similar approach to the appearance of data on screen (and as hard copy) as with its visually appealing database, Pinpoint. Fonts and sizes can be easily changed. Dialogue boxes allow you to alter colour and other aspects of style, indeed to generate output to presentation standard.

This is important in a classroom context, where wall display and the collection of examples of pupils' work in a personal file or project folder count for so much. There are a number of ways to streamline printed output (automatic insertion of time and date, and the use of headers and footers, for example). Printing has a chapter to itself in the manual.

Formatting is performed with similar ease: a simple menu leads to logical dialogue boxes. There is control over 20 formats for numbers and ample control over alignment, font, colour and border, as well as column and row width/height. Oddly, this is also where cell protection is affected.

Replication - though the word does not appear once - is achieved exclusively by means of dragging and selecting with the mouse; if you