



LETTERS

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GETTING UP TO SPEED ON JET SQL

I read Andrew Brust's article on Jet SQL this morning on the way to work [Database Design, "Exploit Jet SQL," *VB/PJ* March 1996]. Thanks! The IN keyword is what I have been searching for. That one keyword is worth the yearly subscription to *VB/PJ*. Can he recommend any publications or books that detail all of the Jet SQL language, or for that matter, any book on SQL? I have looked at some books on SQL but can't really tell which are the best since I am new to the database-SQL world.

Jeff Harris
received by e-mail

Thanks for your kind words on the column. Jet SQL has a few hidden pearls! I'm glad if I could make people aware of them.

SQL books that are relevant to the VB programmer can be hard to come by. For a generic SQL reference I like (believe it or not) SQL for Dummies by Allen G. Taylor published by IDG books. For VB and Jet, I would heartily recommend the newly released Jet Database Engine Programmer's Guide by Dan Haught and Jim Ferguson, published by Microsoft Press. For SQL Server, I think the docs that come with it (printed and online) are pretty good on their own, but there are plenty of books out there as well.—A.B.

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

My head hurts! It happens every time that I get *VB/PJ* in the mail. It's really a great magazine, but it's crammed with too much information. Whenever I open the mail box and

see *VB/PJ* there, I groan because I know that it will consume about 1½ to two weeks of my time at home during the evenings trying to digest, decipher, understand, comprehend, and so on. Then, when I finally finish it, I sigh a big sigh of relief because I've survived another one.

Honestly, *VB/PJ* is really a super source of information. I've been programming in RPG on AS/400s for over eight years now. Believe me, I know the 400, and I know how to build business applications (yadda, yadda, yadda). About a year and a half ago, I took it upon myself to delve into VB. I was involved in a large project that our company developed recently (I'm a consultant), and greatly expanded my VB horizons. Now, with the advent of VB4, classes, OLE servers, and so on, I'm back to "struggle city" again. The main consolation that I continue to afford myself is that from time to time, one of your authors in their article will say, "we are still learning." That makes me feel better. Maybe by the time VB5 is out, I'll be almost up to speed on VB4.

Ted Gamble
received by e-mail

ARTICLE NEEDED HELP

Woody Pewitt was right on the mark when he said that most developers leave online Help (and documentation in general) in the wings when building their applications. But he missed too many marks when presenting his information about Help file creation, marks that would clearly show the way to top-notch results.

First is the ironic suggestion that a Help developer needs no more than the Help compiler and an RTF editor (Word). While it certainly can be done, he might as well have suggested that VB developers go back to coding their UI by hand. The point of Help-development applications is to free developers from the coding drudgery of design.

Not all Help tools cost in the several-hundred-dollar range (although some of the best, such as RoboHelp, Doc-To-Help, and ForeHelp, do). Excellent Help tools are available for less than \$100, and some of those don't require Word; they're WYSIWYG tools. One, Visual Help, looks and feels very much like VB.

Second, it's hard to understand how the system can be "daunting," especially to an experienced programmer. The HPJ file works the same as a MAK file, the RTF file is simply your source code, a compiler is a compiler, and so on.

Third, a step is missing in the sequence

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describing how to make Help context-sensitive: provide the topic numbers to the application developer (presuming he or she is a different person) so that the correct WinHelp calls can be created. (These steps should have been in a numbered list, not a bulleted one.)

Fourth, there's no mention of WinHelp 4.0 (Help for Windows 95). While you can use a Help file designed for Windows 3.x in Windows 95, WinHelp 4.0 adds numerous features that are not at all mentioned. Two good examples are the Contents page and the full text search.

The Contents page is important because it appears only when a separate file, the CNT file, is included with the HLP file. A well-designed Contents page provides a fully expandable table of contents for easy access by the user.

The full text search is important because this is a feature that the developer can create and include with a Help file, but usually wouldn't want to because the separate database file would often be too large. End users can build the same database file on their own machines and add full-text-search capability at any time to any Windows 95 Help file.

Fifth is the critical omission of defining how a context string must be built: with no spaces and with only alphanumeric characters (plus periods and underscores). WinHelp 4.0 isn't as limiting; you can use most of the ASCII character set, including spaces. However, Microsoft now calls these topic IDs rather than context strings.

Sixth, the Microsoft book about WinHelp is called *Microsoft Windows 95 Help Authoring Kit*, but it's not a book I'd recommend. Instead, the definitive reference is *Developing Online Help for Windows*, by Scott Boggan, David Farkas, and Joe Welinske. This book contains not only WinHelp specifics, but overall design concepts. A Windows 95 version was due out in January. Advanced WinHelp developers should see *Designing Windows 95 Help* by Mary Deaton and Cheryl Lockett Zuback.

Finally, it's not clear who the audience for this article is. In most cases it seems that the author is talking to a VB developer who will also design and write the Help. However, one early paragraph refers to the programmer in the third person and speaks separately of programmer and Help author.

As a WinHelp developer who uses VB to prototype interfaces, I'd say it's not beneficial to imply that programmers should design and write documentation. Technical writers, especially those specializing in Help development, are trained and experienced in the skills necessary to translate computerese into user-useful information and to present that information properly within the limitation of a computer screen.

Programmers should enlist the aid of a competent WinHelp developer early in the

design process. The result of such an action will be a top-notch online Help system to match the high quality of the application it accompanies.

*Chuck Martin
San Francisco, California*

AN EARLY START

My name is Jeremy Honl. I am 11 years old. I tried to follow Chris Barlow's instructions in the "Your First VB4 App" [Getting Started with VBA, *VBPJ*/February 1996]. Everything is OK except the printing. At first it said there was an error and the debug pointed to hDC in the line, "RichTextBox1.SelPrint CommonDialog1.hDC." I kept trying and then it seemed like it was working and sending to the printer (no errors), but nothing went to the printer. My printer works from other applications like Word and Excel. Can you send me some advice?

*Jeremy Honl
received by e-mail*

It sounds like you're doing great... I wish I had started at 11!

The problem is not yours... there is a bug in the RichTextBox control so you need to use the printer.hDC rather than the CommonDialog.hDC. I posted the revised code on my Web page: <http://www.sunoptech.com/users/chrisb.htm>.

Keep me posted on your progress with VB!—C.B.

XBASE PROGRAMMER TOM RETTIG DIES AT 54

Tom Rettig, known by the general public for his performance as Jeff Miller in the 1950s television series "Lassie" but better known by the software industry for his Xbase programming work, died of natural causes on February 15. He was 54.

Rettig was president of Rettig Micro Corp. of Marina del Rey, California, one of the major players in the third-party add-on tools market for Microsoft FoxPro, before the advent of OLE controls. Established in 1982, Rettig Micro is best known for its Tom Rettig's Office product, a suite of rapid application development (RAD) tools and source code for building FoxPro applications that run on SCO UNIX, MS-DOS, Windows, and Macintosh. Rettig taught himself how to program after leaving the acting and farming businesses. "My life has been a wonderful adventure," Rettig told the *Los Angeles Times* in a 1990 interview.

Rettig is survived by two sons, millions of Lassie fans, and a community of software developers who mourn his passing.