

# Review: AppleScript 123

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## AppleScript 1-2-3: A self-paced guide to learning AppleScript

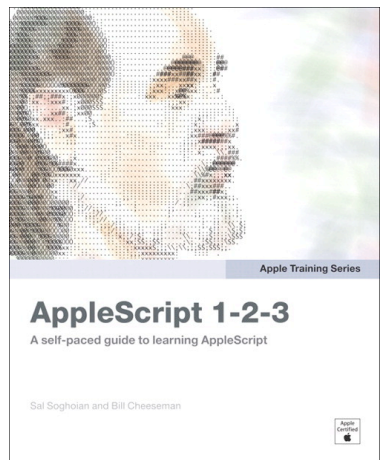
Sal Soghoian and Bill Cheeseman  
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Like most Mac users, I had long been aware of something called AppleScript, but had always assumed that it was for geeks rather than for ordinary users. But then some years ago, probably after having performed the same series of repetitive actions for the zillionth time, I decided to take a closer look at AppleScript and bought *AppleScript: The Missing Manual* by Adam Goldstein (O'Reilly, 2005). This book is aimed at the absolute beginner, and I still make daily use of some very simple scripts that I wrote with the help of this book.

But apart from the most basic of commands, I never really understood what I was doing, and so writing a script was very much a hit-or-miss affair. Wondering how I might move on to the next stage, I came across *AppleScript: The Definitive Guide* by Matt Neuburg (O'Reilly, 2004). I was especially drawn to this book by the fact that it treats AppleScript as a “language.” But rather than providing a step-by-step course in how to master the language of AppleScript, it could perhaps be better described as a reference grammar, and as anyone who has studied another language will know, studying a grammar book is not the most effective way to learn a language.

I thus found myself at an impasse, and AppleScript was left by the wayside for a couple of years. My interest was recently piqued, however, on learning that a new “self-paced guide to learning AppleScript” had been published, and it was with considerable anticipation that I awaited the arrival of *AppleScript 1-2-3*.

The first thing to strike one about this book is its size: almost 900 pages long and about 1.7 kg in weight. The book as a whole is divided into two parts, which are further divided into thirty lessons or chapters. Part I, “Instant AppleScript,” covers the basics of writing scripts, and its twelve chapters are meant to be read in sequence, while Part II, “Essential Topics,” deals with a variety of topics that can be explored as the need arises. (It might be noted that chapter 12 ends with the following statement [p. 415]: “In



the next chapter, you'll assemble everything you've learned up to this point and think about overall design of your scripts. That will bring Part I, *Instant AppleScript*, to a close." But the next chapter is in fact the first chapter of Part II, and there does not appear to be any chapter on the overall design of scripts.)

The authors assume no prior knowledge of AppleScript on the part of the reader, but by the end of the first chapter, appropriately titled "The First Step," you will have learnt how to write a useful script for resetting the Desktop display. The second chapter, "Dictionaries," I found especially helpful. One of the reasons that I had never made much progress with AppleScript was that I did not really understand how to read the dictionary carried by every scriptable application. But after having studied this chapter, I feel far better equipped to utilize an application's dictionary.

Subsequent chapters in Part I deal with topics such as identifying, finding and manipulating scriptable objects, variables, conditionals, repeat loops and error handlers, and according to the authors, once you have mastered these, "you'll be a very dangerous person." I can't say that I feel particularly "dangerous" yet, but then I am still having trouble getting to grips with repeat loops.

Part II begins with a detailed guide to Script Editor, the utility for composing, editing, compiling and running scripts that is included with AppleScript. Other chapters in Part II deal with subjects such as working with text, manipulating image files, running scripts on schedule, and creating dynamic scriptable databases. I didn't find the practical examples, some of which are quite complex, applicable to my own computing needs, but I am sure that other people would find them useful.

Each chapter begins with a brief overview and ends with a summary and a "What's Next" section. The chapters themselves vary greatly in length, but they are all accompanied by a wealth of examples, both illustrative and practical, and each example is thoroughly explained. The text, interspersed with illustrations, is well laid out and easy to follow, and there is also a fairly extensive index, indispensable for a book of this size. In addition, the "Foreword" refers to downloadable examples and scripts from the book's companion Web site, but I was unable to find them. If they are actually available, it would be helpful if they were more readily accessible.

All in all, *AppleScript 1-2-3* is to be highly recommended for anyone looking for a comprehensive and practical introduction to AppleScript. It seems to me that one's scripting skills grow in direct proportion to the degree to which one is able to imaginatively harness the almost unlimited possibilities of AppleScript to one's own actual computing needs, and this book should provide the reader with plenty of material to stimulate his or her imagination towards this end.

*Thanks to Peachpit Press for providing a review copy of this book.*