

Three Ways to Excel
Three Excel Book Reviews

By Veronica C. Valero, GGCS Member*

BOOK #1: "Excel 2003 Personal Trainer"
By CustomGuide, O'Reilly Media, 464pp
and CD Tutorial Disk, ISBN: 0-596-00853-8, \$29.95

The CD: This book's gem is the CD that comes with it, an "interactive simulation software replicating the experience of using Excel 2003", which can be used without installing Excel. The CD alone is worth the book's cost, because it both "tells you" (with audio), and "shows" you how to do something and lets you do it. I suggest first looking at the CD lessons as an Excel overview, then go to the lessons in the book, where topics are covered in more detail.

Unfortunately, this valuable CD may be missed by readers, because installation and user instructions are minimal. Although I read about the CD in a short paragraph at the beginning of the book and installed the "Practice" folder, I didn't realize that the CD also included an interactive hands-on video tour of each lesson in the book until another computer consultant brought it to my attention.

About the Book: There are 13 chapters, each containing an average of 12 lessons, each lesson taking about 3 pages. It is filled with plenty of visual aids and large, readable screen shots of what you will see on the computer. Liberal use of "white space" has a calming effect, not overwhelming the student with lots of text to read.

Each lesson has practice exercises with step-by-step instructions for working with Excel worksheets. These exercises also are on the accompanying CD. Although going through the basic introductory lessons were a bit rudimentary for me, I was surprised to learn some new tricks! For example, many computer books have tables or lists of command short cut keys on navigating with the keyboard (to move one cell to the left: press ←, or Shift + Tab), which I often skim over, intending to memorize later. In these exercises, you are given hands-on instructions on various ways to navigate. Homework at the end of each chapter reinforces skills you just learned.

See For Your Self: Go to www.oreilly.com/catalog, locate and click on *Excel 2003: Personal Trainer* to open the link and locate both sample chapters and sample tutorials found on the CD.

A Disappointment—Editorial Mistakes: Lesson 1.8 incorporates the first practice file. Unfortunately, *Personal Trainer* fails to help you locate the "Practice" folder containing the practice files! Instructions indicated that the file was located in a "Practice" folder in "My Documents"—not true. I had to go back to the beginning of the book to find out that the installer

created a shortcut in the “Start” menu under the title “Personal Trainer” where I could access the practice documents. Not good, especially for novices.

Suggestions to the Publisher: The typeface both in the book and CD is quite small for “mature” eyes or the visually challenged. Larger fonts would serve a larger population. It also would help if estimated times for lessons were given at the beginning of each lesson. Likewise, at the end of each lesson directions should be clear to either stop, save changes, or continue on to the next lesson.

Despite a few short comings, I was so impressed with the interactive CD and the easy-to-follow exercises in the book, that I give this training book

4 STARS.

BOOK #2: "Excel: The Missing Manual"

by Matthew MacDonald. Pogue Press, O'Reilly

771pp, ISBN: 0-596-00664-0, \$39.95

The back book cover states: “Whether you’re desperate to make sense of a program that you’ve been forced to use, or you’re a sophisticated spreadsheet jockey looking to expand your skills...this book is for you.” This manual is geared more as a reference manual, not an introductory tutorial. This book covers subjects you’d expect: from creating, formatting and editing worksheets to entering simple or complex formulas and functions – the math end of Excel. Charts, graphics, advanced data analysis and other topics are included.

The book is detailed: it takes six pages to cover different ways of saving documents. And, throughout the book there are parenthetical sidebars containing more insightful details on tricks, tips, and by-the-way explanations. Visually, the manual is heavy on text and light on helpful graphics. It probably will discourage novices or those who hate to read manuals. But, experienced users will appreciate in-depth information presented.

This book assumes you are experienced and comfortable with computers. And although the introductory chapter explains what a spreadsheet does, it’s not really geared towards a novice who wants to learn how to use Excel—now! While it gives instructions, it is not set up as an instructional manual that builds on each chapter because there is a lot of reading and explanation before instruction. E.g.: although pages 4-9 cover the rudimentary how-tos in creating a worksheet, you have to read to page 37 before learning how to enter and work with the data. It also can be frustrating if you are not familiar with the terminology.

If the book had a quick-start chapter giving minimal explanations with bullet point step-by-step instructions on how to immediately create and work with a spreadsheet, it would have more appeal to novices. To see if this book is for you, go to: www.missingmanual.com to view a

sample chapter. One generally assumes a “missing” manual would address both novices and experienced users. Because this book fails in this area, I give it only
3 STARS

BOOK #3: "Excel Annoyances"
by Curtis Frye, O'Reilly, 235pp
ISBN: 0-596-00728-0, \$24.95
(Covers Excel97-Excel2003)

Kill Klippy! That is the first annoyance in the book: If you don't know who Clippy is, Mr. Frye describes him as “that blasted paperclip ‘helper’ thing...that elbows...its way onto the screen” while one's happily entering data.” And we've all experienced what he wrote: “By the time I get ride of it, I've lost track of what I'm doing and it takes forever to get back in the grove.” Now my Clippy is dead! I love “*Excel Annoyances*” just for that.

Excel Annoyances chapters are broken down into areas: Entering Data Annoyances, Format Annoyances, Formula Annoyances, Manipulating Data Annoyances, Chart Annoyances, etc. Each chapter has sub-categories, and then individual annoyances. The layout is in Q&A format often found in the technology magazines, where readers write in a problem and the computer techie gives an answer. In this case the “Q” is “The Annoyance” and the “A” is “The Fix”. The best way to use this book is to skim the table of contents until you find one of your personal annoyance and then turn to that page. It would be more helpful if each annoyance had a page number next to it.

Examples: One of my personal annoyances was how to press “enter” in a cell so that the text drops to the next line, rather than move to the next cell. This annoyance is located in the first chapter under: *Add a Carriage Return to a Cell's Contents*:

“The Fix: Chill, Baby. You can add a line break inside a cell by pressing Alt-Enter.”

So simple - if only I had known! Humor is used throughout the book, which helps an otherwise dry topic. Some answers are surprising and unexpected too. Here's one, *Prevent Excel from Scrolling Too Quickly* – wherein Excel's scroll is slow when you start, but suddenly speeds up.

The Fix: “This is a known bug in Excel 2002 and earlier versions. Microsoft *finally* fixed it in Excel 2003, but that doesn't help anyone with the earlier edition...(unless you have a wheel mouse) ...I recommend clicking the scrollbar just above or below the slider to move up or down one screen at a time...”

Some annoyances involve topics that only Excel pros with accounting degrees would ask; the fixes can be too technical or complex for weekend users. Nevertheless, this is a handy reference book that uses humor and interesting facts to encourage readers to discover how to overcome quirky Excel features. In addition, there are sidebars throughout the book with info and website addresses to download helpful utilities, tools, software and macros that enhance the Excel experience.

An added benefit to *Excel Annoyances* is learning how people use the program. It describes real-life applications of Excel that you might not have realized was possible. This is not a manual; it's a valuable resource tool.

My one disappointment is that I couldn't find fix-its for some of my pet peeves. The author acknowledges that his book is not comprehensive...there just wasn't space. But there's hope: If you want a specific annoyance considered for the next issue, you're invited to email Mr. Frye at annoyances@oreilly.com. To see a sample chapter of the book, go to www.oreilly.com/catalog. locate *Excel Annoyances*.

4 STARS

***GGCS:** These book reviews written for the Golden Gate Computer Society www.ggcs.org