

The optimal way to learn Microsoft Access

End up with an Access application as a result of learning the software

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Access, as the database component of the Microsoft Office Suite is a somewhat more complicated product than Word .

There are three main components to having an optimum learning environment for a complicated software product.

1. Choosing a suitable application to develop and use as your learning vehicle
2. Using a coach or mentor to help keep you on the right track and help you over the rough spots
3. Being willing to use resource materials as a major source of help

Let's discuss these points in depth.

Choice of an application to develop

The project you choose should be somewhat simple – but at the same time something that is needed and will be used by you or someone in your business. Part of learning to do a good job of developing an Access application is getting feedback on its use – so you will gain some ideas about what works and does not work for users.

An uncomplicated mailing list that also tracks just a little information beyond the address and phone number would be good. The additional information might be to track money, event registration, or time associated with the list. You will want to discuss your ideas on this with your mentor, so that he or she can help you keep it to a size that will not be overwhelming.

Choice of a mentor or coach

This person first of all needs to have some in-depth knowledge of Access. Someone who has developed multiple Access projects would be most desirable. Some questions you could ask as a test of depth are:

1. How many applications have you developed using Access?
2. How comfortable are you working with VBA (Visual Basic for Applications)?

VBA is the programming language that is used behind the Microsoft Office Suite. It is not readily apparent to the casual user, but it is a very powerful language, and can be used to hide totally the Access user interface.

You and your mentor will need to determine whether use of VBA will be appropriate for your application. See “Why Would You Want to Use VBA?” to help you make this decision.

Your mentor or coach needs to be someone who understands that role. This would be someone who is good at collaborating rather than just telling what to do. How you proceed should be a joint decision between the two of you – not just one person calling the shots.

You will also want your mentor/coach to agree to be available to help you out when the going gets rough. If you are going to pay this person, be sure there is some time allowed for this – beyond your face-to-face meetings. Many problems can be addressed in a phone or e-mail conversation.

Use of resource materials

The online help that comes with Access will be an important source of information. You will need to become familiar with it and how to navigate it. If you are going to get into VBA at all you will need to be sure that the help files for VBA are loaded on your computer. They are generally not installed with a typical installation – so you may need to get your install disks out and add VBA help.

Don't try to absorb all of the help information in one or two sittings. Start out with an overview and by reading some of the introductory information. Then as you are trying to solve various problems during application development, go to help for information on what you are doing. Microsoft's indexing is not as complete as I would like to have it, so sometimes you will have to really scratch around to find what you need. That might be a good time to call your mentor/coach.

There are also a lot of third-party books available on Access. A way to help you decide which one to buy is to go to a bookstore that has chairs you can sit down in. (My favorite is the Boston University bookstore – it is in the building under the Citgo sign.) Pick three or four Access books (for the version you are working with) and sit down in a chair with them. Then research your current issue with Access. Go home with the book that best meets your needs.

When looking at third-party books you may want to distinguish between reference books and tutorials. They do serve different purposes, so you may want to make a choice based on your needs. A tutorial is most suited for learning a process step by step and does not work well if what you want to do is a commando-raid type search for a particular topic.

When to ask for help

One of the things that can be a problem is keeping a good perspective on when to ask for help. In my experience I have found that there can be extremes here. There are some people who overly depend on the mentor/coach, while others have to be in dire pain before they ask for help. It is like diarrhea and constipation. Neither one is desirable – a balance is needed.

You will gain a lot by doing your research on a particular problem. Indeed, I will frequently find answers to other questions I have had while doing the research. Additionally, the solutions to difficult problems tend to become more memorable than the easy ones.

My suggestion would be to make a significant amount of effort before going to your mentor/coach, but don't waste inordinate amounts of time on a thorny problem.

Why this approach works

Research on adult learning styles shows that the best learning occurs when the learner is actively involved in the learning process. This process makes that happen. The traditional classroom or workshop does not allow that to happen. See [The 1-to-5-day Workshop Scam](#) for further information on this.

A big advantage to this approach is that you get meaningful work done in the process – not to mention the time that will eventually be saved by use of the application that you develop.