

Business Basic For The Beginner

By Elizabeth Barnett

Business Basic can be something of a mystery if you don't already work with someone who knows it. Learning the language has always been more or less an apprenticeship process, with knowledge being passed from one programmer to another. But there are a few resources out there that a beginner can easily access.



Although it's estimated that about 2,000,000 computer systems are now using Business Basic applications, there has never been a standardization movement found with other languages. Originally developed in the early 1970s as an interactive language for mini-computer systems, Business Basic was proprietary until the 1980s when it was ported by a number of vendors to UNIX, DOS, VMS, and Xenix operating systems. Attempts to standardize the language were not supported by the industry for various reasons. Today, standardization would be impossible. Since the advent of Windows-based, GUI technology around 1994, the language has diverged too much. Although the different vendors' products may be similar in functionality, the implementation varies to an extreme degree.

Some see this lack of standard training resources as a question of priorities. Part of the problem was, and still is, that the market for Business Basic is small, and the firms serving that market are also relatively small. Most of these companies would rather allocate resources to product development rather than to the writing of training materials.

For general principals of programming using Business Basic, Scott Ryan's book, *Business Basic--What do you say after it says: Ready>*, is about the only existing text for the beginner. You can order it for \$65, plus shipping and handling, from his website (see [Basic Surfing 101](#)). It details what Scott calls "plain vanilla" Business Basic and can help fill the gap between no knowledge of the language at all and manufacturers' documentation, which is often written assuming that the user has some prior knowledge of the language. While it does give enough information to develop whole character-based systems, it was written about ten years ago and doesn't contain information about current programming technologies, such as GUI applications.

So, where to start learning?

1. The first step, naturally, is to determine whether the company for which you're creating the application has any documentation.
2. Then try to determine which variant of Business Basic is being used. There are two main families, MAI and Data General, with several dialects within each group. Contact the manufacturer and try to obtain documentation.
3. Join a newsgroup and/or mailing list. These are very open to sharing information and often will put you in contact with programmers who have years of experience with Business Basic.
4. Read source code. Because Business Basic is an interpretive language, most source code is human- readable. On the web, BASIS' Programmer's Technical Archive has several documents available for downloading that contain sample code and code dictionaries (see *Basic Surfing 101*).
5. Take a class. BASIS has training classes throughout the year (see our training schedule in this issue). Other companies do, too.

Basic Surfing 101

One of the best sites (besides our own!) for Business Basic information is [Gary McClellan's website](http://www.bbpro.org) at *www.bbpro.org*. You can find history, mailing lists, vendors, newsgroups, and a Business Basic FAQ.

Our own [BASIS website](http://www.basis.com) at *www.basis.com* also offers a wealth of information, including newsgroups, an online knowledgebase, technical tips, and archived issues of the *The BASIS Advantage*. Check out the following documents available from our [Programmer's Technical Archive](http://www.basis.com/support/pta.html) at *www.basis.com/support/pta.html*:

[A Sample Coding Standard for the Manual Project](#)

A very simple coding standard for programmers new to BBx® coding techniques.

[Coding Standards and Coding Styles](#)

A brief discussion of coding standards and styles.

[What Every Good BBx Programmer Should Know About Programming in ASCII Files](#)

A discussion of one method for writing BBx programs in ASCII text files, using bbx4cpl and bbx4lst (pro5cpl and pro5lst), limited usage of C pre-processors, setting up and managing projects, and some of the "tricks" of the trade.

Gearing Up for Visual PRO/5

An introduction to Visual PRO/5® programming, including a discussion of event-driven programming, terminology, sample code, and some design suggestions.

You can also check out Scott Ryan's website at www.business-basic.com. The information about how to order his book, *Business Basic--What do you say after it says: Ready>*, is there.