

The SAS-L Story

Around the Clock, Around the World... ...Virtually, SAS-L

by Andy Parks and Sally Muller

ABSTRACT

You came to this conference for any of a variety of reasons: to ask some specific questions; to learn about products, platforms, and procedures from experts; to learn about some of the things that SAS® can do but you just didn't know about; or perhaps to hear from fellow SAS users about how a SAS product actually works. A conference is a great way to do all these things, and more. But can you imagine having the opportunity to confer with your SAS colleagues more than once a year? More than twice a year? How about 24 hours a day, 7 days a week?

In a nutshell, SAS-L is a 24-hour a day, 7-day-a-week worldwide conference of SAS users.

INTRODUCTION

SAS-L is a worldwide discussion on the Internet. Discussions on SAS-L are wide-ranging. Some are simple queries about how to do a particular task, or what a particular error message means. Others represent bugs discovered in the software with information about work-arounds that users have found. Some represent more philosophical discussions about enhancements to the software that users would like or complaints about particular implementations. Often other users know the answer to a question, or where to find the answer, and respond on the same day. It is not unusual for a user to post a query to the list and receive several replies within minutes of their posting. This has made it particularly valuable to the small school or other organization where there might be only a small number of SAS users at a particular site.

A little background

SAS is one of the most widely-used programs running on mainframes, minicomputers, and microcomputers at universities, research organizations, businesses, and government. From the onset most sites running the SAS System have had their own local SAS consultants, "gurus," for helping users with the software. Over time, as the breadth of the SAS software products increased, even these

gurus were likely to be stumped by other user's questions. So there was a collective sigh of relief when in the fall of 1986 (with the advent of the LISTSERV program for supporting mailing lists on Bitnet) the SAS-L list was formed by Harry Williams of Marist College and Harold Pritchett of University of Georgia. Within a few months the readership had grown to several hundred. Within a few years the subscribers had risen over 1,000 and there were probably many more readers because some subscriptions were distributed to multiple people at the same site.

SAS Institute itself is connected to the Internet and provides technical support via e-mail and FTP. While Institute staff do not directly post to SAS-L, it is read by many employees who find it an excellent way to learn about the concerns of users.

When in 1991, at the International SAS Users Group Conference, SAS Institute recognized SAS-L as an official SAS users group, SAS-L came of age! Now, besides being one of the most popular discussion lists on the Internet, and arguably the one with the best claim to "international" status, SAS-L is also the largest recognized users group.

Access to SAS-L

If your site is an Internet node, or has mail access to either through a gateway from another computer network, you can access SAS-L.

Internet was originally chartered for the purpose of facilitating non-commercial exchange of information consistent with the academic purposes of its members. For the purpose of this paper, usage of the term Internet applies to Internet, BITNET, NSFNET, USENET, and the many other academic research networks. Recently there has been exponential growth in the use of the Internet, from academic use, to government use, to commercial use. Even so, many many discussions, including SAS-L, retain the spirit of the original non-commercial use charter.

Like some other popular Internet discussion lists, SAS-L is accessible through a "USENET" or "E-mail." One

subscribes to SAS-L via E-mail, and this is the easiest metaphor to describe -- and we'll return to it shortly. But sites are increasingly encouraging their users to read popular discussions using USENET. USENET is the collection of computers all over the world that exchange USENET news -- thousands of "NEWSGROUPS" (forums) cover a wide range of topics, all the way from the sublime to the ridiculous. The NEWSGROUP articles are distributed all over the world to USENET sites that wish to carry them (sometimes over the Internet or local BBS, sometimes not). Usenet Newsgroups are like "bulletin boards" where you can read and reply to messages posted by other people. Probably the biggest advantage of newsgroups is that they allow individuals in a large institution to all access discussions without generating duplicate mail messages in all their mail boxes.

If your site has access to USENET, then you will be able to read SAS-L and interact in the discussion by accessing "comp.soft-sys.sas".

E-mail can be exchanged with a wide variety of systems connected directly and indirectly to the Internet. The e-mail may travel solely over the Internet, or it may traverse other networks and systems but in either case it goes directly into your local mailbox. Many e-mail mailing lists use an automated mailing list manager (MLM) program called "LISTSERV." You will often see the term "LISTSERV lists." It simply refers to a discussion list is running under the network software package called LISERV.

How To Subscribe

If you decide you prefer an e-mail subscription to SAS-L, rather than reading the discussion via its Usenet newsgroup, just send e-mail to the LISERV nearest to you, with the text:

subscribe <listname> <Your Name>

For example, if I wanted to subscribe to SAS-L, I would send e-mail to the LISERV at Virginia Polytechnical Institute:

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

To: LISERV@vtvm1.cc.vtvm.edu
From: andyp@access.digex.net
Subject: subscribe to a mailing list

subscribe SAS-L Andy Parks

For a brief guide to the LISERV, send the text "send LISERV refcard."

The following are the five LISERVs that carry SAS-L:

Internet name	Location
VM.MARIST.EDU	Marist College
VTVM1.CC.VT.EDU	VPI
UGA.CC.UGA.EDU	University of Georgia
VMUCS.UALBERTA.CA	University of Alberta
AWIIMC12.IMC.UNVIE.AC	Vienna, Austria

How to Unsubscribe

Nothing is quite as frustrating as subscribing to a service and being unable to unsubscribe. Unsubscribing is usually simple. Just as you sent a message to the LISERV to subscribe, just send an e-mail message to the SAME LISERV to unsubscribe.

HOW TO UNSUBSCRIBE

To: LISERV@vtvm1.cc.vtvm.edu
From: andyp@access.digex.net
Subject: unsubscribe to a mailing list

unsub SAS-L

Sometimes problems arise when your e-mail address changes and you try to unsubscribe using your new e-mail address or if you send your unsubscribe message to a LISERV other than the one to which you subscribed. These problems are rare and if you do encounter them, other SAS-L subscribers will help. In addition, each LISERV site has a postmaster who can straighten things out for you.

See Appendix A for some "Subscription Options."

How to Post Questions/Answers to the List

In order to post a message, whether it is a question, response to a question, or a statement, use your mail reader to compose the message. Then send the message to SAS-L@(one of the SAS-L LISERV sites). Usually you can also REPLY to a message that is already posted and most mailers will send to the correct address. The site's LISERV program in turn picks up and distributes your

mail to all the subscribed users.

If your E-mail system supports subject lines, please try to use one that is meaningful, for example:

EXAMPLE: Original Post

To: SAS-L@vtvm1.cc.vtvm.edu
From: andyp@access.digex.net
Subject: A problem with named pipes in SAS OS/2 6.08

Hi SAS-Lers,
Since updating SAS OS/2 6.08 TS404 to TS407.....

When responding to a question, it is sometimes necessary to repeat the original question for clarity, such lines are usually prefixed with "> " to distinguish them from your text.

However, please "echo" with discretion. Echoing the entire text of a long message just to add a few ideas of your own can be annoying and counterproductive.

EXAMPLE: Reply to Post

To: SAS-L@uga.cc.uga.edu
From: uncsml@uncmvs.oit.unc.edu
Subject: re: A problem with named pipes in SAS OS/2 6.08

Andy Parks (andyp@digex.access.net) wrote:

> Since updating SAS OS/2 6.08 TS404 to > TS407.....

I had exactly the same experience Andy! I called SI tech supp....

What is an Appropriate Posting?

The suite of behavioral patterns that are acceptable on the Internet is referred to as "netiquette." Each discussion list will have it's own flavor, but there are many things that are commonly recognized.

SAS-L has a decidedly focused, yet anarchistic orientation. The discussion tends to center on SAS and things related to SAS, yet it's not so strict that some levity or even philosophical debate isn't allowed.

Some of the accepted practices on SAS-L and most other lists include:

Use the subject line -- see "Original Post" example, above.

Use a standard header if you want -- The SAS-L FAQ (described below) suggests a standard header that, in conjunction to the subject line, can help readers identify the subject, and the poster, and get a summary.

If posting a problem, post it succinctly, without superfluous information -- Include code, SAS LOGs and output, if necessary, but only as is necessary to describe and illustrate the question. It's useful to have a succinct description of what you are trying to do, and perhaps your code. But try to isolate your problem, perhaps reducing it down to just the suspect code. If a 500 line program is failing on 3 lines of code, you'll loose alot of potential respondents to your question if you post all 500 lines. The better you can describe your problem, the better help you'll get.

Summarize responses -- Some queries are rather narrow, and the initiator will ask for responses to be sent privately to him/her in the interest of saving bandwidth. They often will then summarize the responses to the list. This is courteous and highly recommended, because no matter how narrow the topic, there's someone else who'd like to know the answer.

Stay away from commercial posts -- Be careful not to be appearing to be selling your services, products, or your company's products. There's a fine line sometimes, particularly if you work for a high-profile well known company and offer your opinions. But there are blatant misuses of the Internet, unsolicited messages having nothing to do with SAS. These are largely generated outside of SAS-L and are sent broadcast to lists of LISTSERV lists -- the equivalent of electronic junk mail. Job postings are a different matter, if they are posted reasonably. Usually someone will post something starting off with "I heard this through the grapevine..." and ending with a disclaimer that the poster has no connection with the company looking for SAS programmers. The thinking is that this type of message serves the community of SAS users by making information about job availability known, and it helps out companies who hire SAS programmers.

If the info will be of interest to SAS users, post it! -- Just because the message you're about to post is narrow in focus doesn't mean that other SAS users won't be interested. At the same time, be ready to take your conversation off-line if you've found some individuals who have responded but if it is getting quite off topic. Consider collecting the gist of the findings and summarizing to SAS-L at a later time.

The SAS-L FAQ, SAS-L Archives, and SAS-L Software

As an ongoing discussion about SAS by SAS users, SAS-L is a wonderful resource. But wait! There's more! There's a list of frequently asked questions (FAQ), a complete set of archives, and user-contributed software available also!

SAS-L FAQ -- FAQ stands for "Frequently Asked Questions." The SAS-L FAQ doesn't answer any SAS questions per se, but it tells you all about the SAS-L discussion list so you can get your SAS questions answered!

SAS-L Archives -- If you seem to recall a discussion on a topic, but didn't save the messages that addressed it, you'll be glad to know about the SAS-L archives. The LISTSERV program keeps a running log of all the messages ever posted to SAS-L, cataloged by month, and available at five sites:

Internet name	Archive Starting Date
JSE.STAT.NCSU.EDU	1986 November 13
VM.MARIST.EDU	1986 November 13
VTVM1.CC.VT.EDU	1990 November 1
UGA.CC.UGA.EDU	1991 December 17
VM.UCS.UALBERTA.CA	1992 September 1

SAS-L Software -- This public collection of statistical software was originally archived at the University of Illinois at Chicago, but it has recently moved to North Carolina State University. The collection consists of powerful SAS macros and tools, metagraphics device drivers, and textual matter. Its convenient to refer to this archive in your journal articles.

Accessing the SAS-L FAQ, SAS-L Archives, and SAS-L Software

All three of these resources may be retrieved by any of these four methods: Anonymous FTP, Gopher, Telnet, or E-mail.

Note: because many of the systems that are used on the Internet run one version of Unix or another, it is critical to specify upper/lower case correctly. In the examples below, often times case is critical. If you get an error message or your request fails, the first thing to check is that your case is right.

FTP

FTP is a fundamental way of retrieving files (information, software, data) from Internet archives. It is properly named "anonymous FTP." To receive a short guide explaining anonymous FTP and how to use it, send e-mail with the text "help" to info@sunsite.unc.edu.

The example below illustrates how to access the FAQ and Software using FTP. The FAQ includes instructions on how to access the SAS-L Archives.

SAS-L FAQ and SAS-L Software via FTP

```
FTP jse.stat.ncsu.edu
userid: anonymous
password: your e-mail address
Path: type DIR to see directories
      CD software
      CD sas
      GET sasl_faq
or
      GET filename
```

Use GET sasl_faq for the SAS-L FAQ. All of the other files in the directory are SAS-L software (e.g. acfcf.pak, etc.)

GOPHER

GOPHER is by far the best user interface for retrieving the SAS-L resources. Furthermore, depending on the sophistication of your Gopher client, you can read files online, save them, mail them to yourself, or print them.

The following example illustrates how to access the FAQ and Software using GOPHER. The FAQ includes instructions on how to access the SAS-L Archives.

SAS-L FAQ and SAS-L Software via GOPHER

GOPHER jse.stat.ncsu.edu

Path: DIRECTORY Software Tools and Information

DIRECTORY SAS Software Archive

FILE sasl_faq
or
FILE filename

Select sasl_faq for the SAS-L FAQ or one of the other files in the directory for SAS-L software (e.g. acfcf.pak, etc.)

TELNET

Accessing the SAS-L resources with Telnet looks similar to accessing them with a Gopher. Similarly to Gopher, you can read the files online, or save, mail, or print them.

The following example illustrates how to access the FAQ and Software using TELNET. The FAQ includes instructions on how to access the SAS-L Archives.

SAS-L FAQ and SAS-L Software via TELNET

TELNET jse.stat.ncsu.edu

(Normally you need your own personal account and use and password to use Telnet, but when accessing case you may use the special user id, "guest" (lower case) with no password.)

guest

Path: 6. Software Tools and Information

6. SAS Software Archive

1. About the SAS Software Archive
2. filename

38. sasl_faq

Select sasl_faq for the SAS-L FAQ or one of the other files in the directory for SAS-L software (e.g. acfcf.pak, etc.)

E-MAIL

If you have neither FTP, Gopher, or Telnet, you can still use E-mail to access the materials we've been discussing. Just as with the interactive methods, you will be able to obtain both the FAQ and the Software from jse.stat.ncsu.edu. However, to search the SAS-L Archives via e-mail, you will need to send your message to a LISTSERV, as described in the FAQ.

The following examples illustrates how to access the FAQ and Software using E-mail. The FAQ includes instructions on how to access the SAS-L Archives.

SAS-L FAQ and SAS-L Software via E-MAIL

(To get the list of software)

To: ARCHIVE@JSE.STAT.NCSU.EDU

From: andyp@access.digex.net

Subject: Send names and descriptions of all SAS-L Software

send software/sas/readme <= note all lower case

(To get the SAS-L FAQ)

To: ARCHIVE@JSE.STAT.NCSU.EDU

From: andyp@access.digex.net

Subject: Send SAS-L FAQ

send software/sas/sasl_faq <= note all lower case

Comparing the four methods, Gopher, Telnet, FTP, and E-mail, is like comparing apples, oranges, bananas, and aardvarks. One thing that the first three methods have in common is that they are interactive. Gopher provides the best user interface for file search and retrieval but uses more computer resources than the other three methods. Telnet is designed for remote login and also provides a reasonable user interface. FTP is for file retrieval and does not have any file search capabilities but is probably the fastest. E-mail allows you to submit commands to a remote site. There can be a prolonged turn-around time with E-mail, depending on network load. But you can send your request on it's way and get on with other things. Also it should be noted that at peak usage times FTP, Gopher, and Telnet might fail to connect, so there's no guarantee that you'll get fast, interactive response to your queries.

CONCLUSION

SAS-L is an electronic discussion list that gives SAS users 24-hour contact with their peers. The SAS-L slogan is "three answers in 15 minutes." Some say it rivals SAS Institute's Technical Support, which is no mean feat. It is completely user-driven, so that problems and solutions alike are offered by users and even if you never post a query just scanning the messages can bring a wealth of information.

SAS-L adherents are very vocal in their support of the L. Many of them say that SAS-L makes a substantial contribution to their own professional productivity. Each year at the annual SAS Users Group International conference there is a well attended Birds Of a Feather session where SAS-L participants have an opportunity to put a face with a network address and discuss the latest "thread" on the L.

APPENDIX A -- Subscription Options

You might wish to temporarily stop SAS-L messages -- you might be going on vacation, or you might just need to stop the flow of messages for a few weeks. In cases such as these, use the NOMAIL option by sending a message to the LISTSERV with the line:

SET SAS-L NOMAIL

To begin getting SAS-L messages again, send another mail message to the LISTSERV with the line:

SET SAS-L MAIL

Another option is to get all the SAS-L messages for a day at one time using the DIGEST option. Instead of dozens of mail messages a day, you'd only get one large mail message a day. Send a mail message to the LISTSERV with the line:

SET SAS-L DIGEST

This might be especially useful if you want to post SAS-L on an internal network, or if you wish to follow SAS-L along with some other discussions and you don't want to me overwhelmed by the volume of individual mail items that several lists would generate.

References

Davis, Michael (1993), "The One-Eyed Guide to Internet, E-MAIL, LISTSERV, and SAS-L," *Proceedings of the Eighteenth Annual SAS Users Group International Conference*. This paper has been given at several

conferences and local users groups, and is available by sending the message "GET ONEEYE GUIDE" to LISTSERV@ALBNYDH2.BITNET.

Krol, Ed (1992), *The Whole Internet User's Guide and Catalog*, O'Reilly and Associates, Sebastopol CA. Widely available, good reference you can read on the bus or in the bathtub.

Pardee, N. and Miller, J. P. (1988), "How to Use SAS-L, An International Electronic Discussion Group," prepared for SUGI-13.

Acknowledgements

Building knowledge about SAS-L and the Internet doesn't come without a little help from some friends.

We borrowed heavily from J. Philip Miller's FARNET story to write this document.

Karsten Self asked the right questions and ferreted out the information for me to get SAS-L through the Usenet Newsgroup. I could have looked it up in an Internet reference book, but there it was on the 'net!

Others have provided general knowledge about where things are and how to get them: Greg Nelson, Howard Schreier, Michael Friendly, Jack Hamilton, Paul Marsh, Tim Arnold, and Barry Grau.

Bill Goffe at the University of Southern Mississippi for his work "Resources for Economists on The Internet." Send your GOPHER to "wuecon.wustl.edu 671" to pick this up. Chock full of good references on the net. Has this to say about SAS-L: "A high volume list that would appear to be quite useful to SAS users." Also good discussion of types of resources.

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For further information, contact the authors:

Sally Muller uncsml@uncmvs.oit.unc.edu
OIT CB#3460
Wilson Library
UNC
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3460

Andy Parks andyp@digex.com
USITC
500 E St. SW
Washington DC 20436