

Paper SD05

The SAS® Community: How to Be a Part of It!

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ABSTRACT

OK, so now you've learned how to program in SAS. Or perhaps you're an end user, learning how to use the Enterprise Guide. Or you could be a student, just learning; or someone who's been involved with SAS since it became available for use in 1976.

So now what?

Invariably, we all have questions. We run into programming situations we can't quite figure out. A process that we believe should work – but we can't quite seem to line up the code correctly to do it. Or, the other side of that coin – you come up with a perfect solution to a problem you've seen a hundred times, thanks to a new version of an old function in SAS.

Most other languages have neither the active community that SAS does, nor do they have the staunch support that the SAS Institute has offered virtually since its inception. The users of SAS are communicators; we exchange ideas, techniques, and code easily and with a smile. So if you'd like to be a part of it – read on.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the wonderful world of SAS! Whether you are a novice or an expert, you have become a part of a global network of programmers, analysts, students, scholars, authors, and people in virtually every industry. So, you may be asking yourself – so what? Sure, I use SAS. I use FORTRAN, C++, and Access too.

The difference is that we're not dealing with some isolated corporate entity. From the start, Dr. Jim Goodnight and his team have taken the philosophy that there's always more to learn, and that philosophy has continued to grow; which is why new releases of SAS come from a campus called the SAS Institute in Cary NC. From SAS's very inception, a large part of SAS's budget has been both about learning, and offering assistance to the most casual of users. This paper outlines some of the learning facilities that have been developed both by SAS and by its users, and how you can easily participate in them.

USER GROUPS

The user group is exactly what it sounds like; an informal group of users who get together for the express purpose of exchanging SAS information, tips, and techniques. User groups range in size from the informal coffee klatch to the SAS Global Forum, an international meeting of SAS minds.

So why become a part of a user group? For the same reasons why one joins a bowling league, a book club, or a regular bridge game – a common topic of conversation, and the opportunity to enjoy both the camaraderie and the exchange of ideas among peers. I have never run into a better source of information than asking the "expert" sitting next to you, whether that person is a seasoned professional that can give you a wise and experienced opinion, or a relatively new user who might give you the simple answer you were too close to see. The user group is a free exchange of ideas, frequently with members or with speakers obtained via SAS or from the regional user group (RUG).

LOCAL/IN-HOUSE USER GROUPS

Probably the easiest and most convenient place to start is with a local user group (LUG). LUG's or in-house user groups are simply groups of people with a common interest – SAS – and often can relate to one another in a comfortable environment, with common problems that may affect others in their company or in their local area. In-house user groups, such as the one formed inside Westat Inc. in MD, are user groups within a company that meet regularly. Good examples of a local user group would be the Washington DC SAS User Group, DC-SUG (www.dc-sug.org).

[sug.org](#)), or the Greater Atlanta SAS Users Group in Georgia (www.gasug.org). Joining a local or in-house user group is generally pretty simple – just show up for a meeting! Some request a small membership fee to cover refreshments, but I have yet to see a user group turn someone away who just wants to be a part. To learn more about the groups in your area, and links to their sites for more information, at <http://support.sas.com/usergroups/namerica/local.hsql>.

Now, if there are a number of SAS users at your site, or in your area – but no user group – perhaps you would be interested in starting your own group! SAS provides guidelines and suggestions for doing just that, as well as support and assistance. You can find all the details at <http://support.sas.com/usergroups/namerica/local.gdlines.html>. Mostly all it takes is a desire to get together for the common good, fairness in dealing with people – and a desire to learn more about using SAS!

REGIONAL USER GROUPS

There are six regional user groups registered in the U.S.

- NESUG – the NorthEast SAS Users Group (www.nesug.org) (pronounced NEE-sug)
- MWSUG – the MidWest SAS Users Group (www.mwsug.org)
- PNWSUG – the Pacific NorthWest SAS Users Group (www.pnwsug.com)
- WUSS – the Western Users of SAS Software (www.wuss.org)
- SCSUG – the South Central SAS Users Group (www.scsug.org)
- SESUG – the Southeast SAS Users Group (www.sesug.org) (pronounced SEE-sug)

(Of course, the best had to be saved for last... since I have been attending the SESUG conferences since 1998, and a member of the Executive Council since 2002. ☺)

The RUG's generally provide a more extensive service than do the local user groups, in that they typically have an annual conference in the Fall, inviting people worldwide to attend, present, and participate. Like its older "cousin", the SAS Global Forum, people gather to hear papers on topics of interest, panel discussions, network with other SAS users, consult with SAS Institute representatives via the Demo Room, and generally hobnob with people of similar professional interests. The RUG's can also offer a Speaker Sharing program; one where the RUG can provide a speaker on a variety of SAS topics from their own ranks to your LUG or in-house user group meeting, usually at no charge.

So how does one become a part of the RUG? Well, the easiest is to simply attend a conference. You can always begin with just your presence, learning right along with the rest of us. The conferences give you the opportunity to attend workshops taught by knowledgeable SAS instructors, and listen to papers and presentations of a full range of SAS topics. You also have the opportunity to interact with SAS directly in the Demo Room; a display, demonstration, and discussion area. You can talk to representatives from SAS, and sometimes other vendors who do SAS support, to ask questions and exchange thoughts on where SAS has been – and where it might go tomorrow.

You might also become a volunteer to help with the conference; the organizers can always use an extra pair of hands and an extra pair of eyes. You see, the LUG officials, and RUG organizers, are all-volunteer – no one is receiving a paycheck to organize conferences or meetings, publish newsletters, or present papers at the conference.

If you'd like to see what being a part of your regional user group can mean, I encourage you to drop by their website listed above, and take a look. You might be surprised at just how much it offers. Some of the RUG's have arranged to post the proceedings on-line, providing both a valuable research tool, and encouragement for both your attendance and your own thoughts on a paper for the future.

SAS GLOBAL FORUM

Then there's the granddaddy of all SAS conferences, the SAS Global Forum, know originally as the SAS User Group International (SUGI) conference. The first SUGI was a small group of SAS users, sponsored by SAS as a means to exchange information. They met back in 1976, in Kissimmee, Florida, and had a modest 200 attendees. The 1st SAS Global Forum, and 32nd international conference, returned to Kissimmee in 2007, this time meeting at the Walt Disney World Swan & Dolphin Resort, and drew over 3600 SAS enthusiasts from around the world.

Participation in the SAS Global Forum offered training opportunities second to none in the SAS community. Under one roof, you could attend over 125 papers and presentations; take full- and half-day courses, video and on-line training; test for your SAS Certification; and explore an extensive Demo Room.

You can find out more about how to be a part of the SAS Global Forum at <http://www.sas.com/sasglobalforum> .

And the list of SAS conferences and user groups doesn't stop there! There are national specialty groups like PharmaSUG, who use SAS in the pharmaceuticals industry (www.pharmasug.org); the annual Data Mining conference (<http://www.sas.com/events/dmconf>); user groups in Europe, Africa, Australia, Canada, and other nations; the SAS Forum Executive Conference, held this year in Stockholm... the list goes on and on.

Each conference or meeting always features an opportunity to exchange ideas, ask questions, look for help with problems; and most offer speakers from the SAS community with tips, tricks, techniques and innovations.

PRESENTING A PAPER

"I had this good idea for a paper..." is something I have heard at several conferences; and I always encourage people to take that idea, and run with it. Once you have an idea, don't be afraid to share it with the other members of the community. All of the conferences and meetings, from the Global to the local, are always looking for speakers. You can readily get the general format of a paper just by reviewing the Proceedings for a recent conference; or you can download prepared templates from SAS at <http://support.sas.com/events/sasglobalforum/2007/package/index.html>. And know that no paper is rejected out of hand; planners for meetings great and small are always looking for speakers with new ideas.

Once you've decided to write your paper, prepare a draft of the paper or the presentation you plan to give, just to lay out your ideas, narrow or broaden the scope, and decide how you want the paper and presentation to flow. There are those who swear by planning the presentation first, then writing the paper around it; others that believe that the paper must come first, to ensure the ideas gel; another author might advocate writing the abstract and outline, and let both paper and presentation evolve from there. Whatever the case, give your idea a chance to develop!

Then, go out to your RUG website, LUG website or local user group meeting, and submit an Abstract when the Call for Participation or Call for Papers goes out. Calls for Participation usually are sent by RUG's in early Spring; SAS Global Forum in late Fall; and your local or in-house group send out notices depending on how often they meet. As an example; the Virginia SAS Users Group (VASUG), a local user group that meets in Richmond VA (www.vasug.com) meets seven times in 2007; four one-day conferences, and three socials. Once you've attended a SAS conference, you'll probably be on the mailing list for such announcements (especially if you speak to a representative and ask to be).

Like any writing endeavor, don't be discouraged if your first paper is not accepted. And don't be afraid to ask why! The user groups exist to help their members learn; you'll usually find the guidance you need to polish your paper, your idea, or both!

The idea of standing up in front of people is daunting to some; but you don't have to let that stop you from offering a paper! Many of the local and regional user groups offer printed and web-based newsletters, and are always looking for good articles. Regional conferences and the SAS Global Forum typically offer a section called Posters, where you can offer your ideas in graphic form, in a mélange of prose, charts, and pictures.

SAS is always ready to encourage new authors and presenters. Former SUGI and SESUG chairs Greg Nelson and Neil Howard recorded a three-part video course on how to prepare and give a presentation at SUGI 31 in San Francisco, and it is available at http://www.sas.com/apps/webnet/wc_index.jsp?c=wc_sugi31_presentation_pt1_200. The link to Part 2 is http://www.sas.com/apps/webnet/wc_index.jsp?c=wc_sugi31_presentation_pt2_200, part 3 is http://www.sas.com/apps/webnet/wc_index.jsp?c=wc_sugi31_presentation_pt3_200 .

There is, undeniably, a special wonder in being up in front of your peers, sharing ideas with them. Many of today's SAS Press authors began with an idea and a presentation, at a small meeting of a users group.

SAS PRESS

Once known as Books By Users (BBU), SAS Press is a special forum for the SAS community. Paper authors, teachers, and innovators from all through the SAS community are offered the opportunity to publish books in their area of experience and expertise. A few good examples of these are the just-published Building Web Applications with SAS/IntrNet: A Guide the Application Dispatcher, written by SUGI 11 chair Don Henderson; The Little SAS Book: A Primer, by Lora D. Delwiche and Susan J. Slaughter; and SAS Programming by Example by Ron Cody and NESUG 1989 chair Ray Pass. You can see the vast array of books written by SAS users and presenters – and how you can become one of them! - by visiting <http://support.sas.com/publishing/bbu/index.html> .

SAS Press is also usually part of the conference agenda; you can find them in the Demo Room of the conferences, both offering you the opportunity to find books and publications on subjects you need, and aiding you in preparing a manuscript for publication via SAS Press. And, if you just want to see what's new from the SAS publications, you can visit <http://support.sas.com/highlights> .

SAS-L

Almost since the invention of the Internet, there have been communications forums, on-line bulletin boards, and methods for people of almost every interest to find one another. In 1986, a SAS user casually mentioned that a mail list should be started to inform SAS users of new innovations. Harry Williams of Marist University and Harold Prichett of the University of Georgia (UGA) thought that might just be a pretty good idea; and they built the very first incarnation of SAS-L. In time, those two lists were linked together, and later joined by a few others, to host the SAS-L we know today. SAS-L is free to all users, and one subscription to SAS-L will link you to the entire forum. Just go to <http://listserv.uga.edu>, and select Browse -> Subscribe -> Post -> Search -> SAS-L. Or, you can send an e-mail to listserv@listserv.uga.edu, with "subscribe sas-l <your name>" in the body of the message. (The Subject line is ignored.) You'll receive an e-mail shortly thereafter to confirm your subscription; this is done to ensure your name wasn't sent in erroneously, and helps to prevent SPAM. You'll also be advised on how to change your status, remove your name from the list, and so forth.

There's a rather unkind term among bloggers and chatters called "lurking"; reading the posts without actually contributing to the conversation. You need have no fear of that here; everyone is welcome at SAS-L. You may join in the conversation, research a problem to see if anyone's posted a solution, or just read the new posts for ideas. Many of the well-known SAS authors are regular contributors on SAS-L; F. Joseph Kelley, a member of the SESUG Executive Committee, is a regular contributor, as is "Macro Maven" Ron Fehd.

The rules at SAS-L are pretty simple. Treat it as you would any gathering of people interested in SAS, from rookies to professionals. Be polite, listen carefully, stay on topic (it is a SAS forum, there's no sense in introducing your views on politics, the latest movie, or bubblegum cards) – and be open-minded enough to enjoy the learning process!

SASCOMMUNITY.ORG

The newest offering from the SAS Global Users Group Executive Board, in cooperation with SAS Institute, is www.SAScommunity.org , a support site for SAS users worldwide. SAScommunity.org is a new site, and it shows; if you visit it today, then you visit it next week, you'll be surprised at how much it's grown!

The site offers a wealth of information on virtually every sense of the SAS worldwide community. Just to name a few; there are blogs and forums for a variety of interests, plus opportunities to start your own thread; information on user groups, from the SAS Global Forum to the in-house user group under your own roof; calendars of SAS events, so you can plan to attend; published papers from contributors all over the world; the list goes on and on.

Most importantly; the SAScommunity.org website is inviting. It's a very friendly atmosphere, like the user groups themselves. There's no jargon to decipher, no buzzwords to avoid; it's easy to navigate and find the kind of information that you want. It has several features that allow you to ask questions, and add information about your user group's activities. And if SAScommunity.org doesn't have what you're looking for; there are links to other places you can explore, and ways to suggest things that might be helpful to other users as well.

SUPPORT.SAS.COM

The SAS Institute website has two major components; <http://www.sas.com> , the business site; and <http://support.sas.com>, the support area for SAS users everywhere. So how, you might ask, does SAS actually fit into its own community?

Easy. Just like the user groups themselves; it provides information. If you need to know how something works, ask. The website provides copies of in-house papers, directions to local or regional user groups, advice and recommendations; all you could ask from a support site. And, like the SAS Institute members you meet at the Demo Rooms of the various conferences; they listen, too. If you see a need for a feature, ask. Perhaps someone will point out that the feature already exists, and show you how to use it; perhaps someone will let you know that it is forecast in an upcoming release. And if not – the suggestion is noted, carried forward, and considered for future generations of SAS software and support. That's why they are listed here as a part of the community; because they genuinely do participate with everyone from the largest corporation to that coffee klatch of SAS users.

CONCLUSION

Every computer language has its followers; those who think it's the best language ever produced for computers. But it seems to me that among the SAS people; there are more who are willing to share, via SAS-L posts, papers at conferences, user groups the world over, and the SAS Institute's SAS Press program. It's easy to be a part of it; and in fact, you've started just by opening this Proceedings, or coming to the conference. Welcome!

REFERENCES

<http://www.sas.com>

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