

# PARDON MY JARGON

Computer terms suffuse our language. However, as our patient tech-support people can attest, many people don't have a very good grasp on what these terms mean. This column is here to bridge that gap. Now you can communicate better with tech-support and impress your friends with your geek-credentials.

**Byte:** A byte is a unit of measurement, like a gallon or an inch. It's used to describe the capacity of computer components such as RAM and hard-drives (which might explain why people often confuse these two). As a rule of thumb, a single byte is equivalent to a single character or letter. So a thousand bytes (or one kilobyte) allows for a thousand characters worth of information storage. A megabyte, then, is a million bytes or about a thousand kilobytes. A gigabyte (GB) is a thousand megabytes, and so forth. To give you a sense of scale, the text of a six-hundred page paperback novel requires about one megabyte. That means you could store six thousand such novels on the 6GB hard drive of a new iMac allowing you to keep a small bookstore on your desktop. If you stacked 6,000 novels end-to-end in the Grand Canyon they would reach... Well, you get the idea.

**Hard drive or hard disk:** A hard drive is a device your computer uses to store information. Think of it as somewhat like a cassette tape. Like cassettes, hard drives let you record and playback information many times. Like cassettes, they come in different sizes. Instead of minutes, however, the capacity of a hard drive is measured in "bytes" (see above). Physically, a hard drive is about the size of a thick paperback. It lives inside your computer's case, safely ensconced in its "drive bay." Inside the hard drive itself is a stack of "platters" coated with magnetic material not unlike, surprise, a cassette tape. A column of "read-write heads" shuttle back and forth over the platters, reading old information and writing new information. That's what happens when you choose "Save" in an application: the heads write the information onto the platters where it safely stays until you decide to erase it.

**RAM:** stands for Random Access Memory. However, that doesn't mean much to most of us. One of the salespeople here (his initials are Bill Cantrell) has a good metaphor that's more useful for describing what RAM does. He says, think of the processor in your computer as a juggler. RAM is the room in which your processor juggles. The more room the juggler has, the more things he can keep in the air at once without dropping anything.

So, that's what RAM does; what it is, however, is a different question. Physically, RAM consists of a small circuit board that plugs into a slot inside your computer. These chips serve as a holding tank where the processor can store data gotten from the hard disk. The processor can access RAM much faster than it can the hard drive, so it puts currently used information into the RAM. When it's done with that information (e.g., when you close a window) it replaces it with other information. So, more RAM equals fewer trips to the hard disk for the processor thus helping it work faster and better.

**Quicklinks:** [www.whatis.com](http://www.whatis.com)

**FRONT WINDOW** By Fred Lifton

# FileMaker Pro®

Front Window will take an in-depth look at one of our favorite pieces of hardware or software. Sometimes we'll focus on a new, gee-whiz product, other times we'll revisit old friends. This time out we're going to look at one of the most powerful tools available to businesses: FileMaker Pro.

**Like it or not,** lists are a ubiquitous feature of modern life. Everywhere we look, there are lists: TV schedules, phonebooks, to-do lists. If you're in business, these lists multiply ten-fold: lists of customers, orders, invoices, inventory, contacts. To make matters worse, all of these lists are related. There are invoices associated with customers and inventory items associated with invoices and orders associated with inventory items. How do you make sense of this tangle? Two words: FileMaker Pro. Quite simply, FileMaker is an unbelievably powerful tool for managing large amounts of inter-related data. What's really cool about FileMaker is that you can create very sophisticated forms to interact with your data. And you can create these forms with only a little bit of FileMaker expertise. In other words, FileMaker gives you simple, intuitive access to complex, sophisticated tools. However, perhaps the best way to show you what you can do with FileMaker is to show you what *we* do with FileMaker.

FileMaker basically runs Power Mac Pac. We use it for invoicing, quoting, inventory, trade-ins and repairs. How does it work? It works beautifully. Follow along now as I show you how much FileMaker does for us. Let's say a customer comes in to price a new Mac system. I start by opening up a new "quote worksheet" and typing the customer's contact info in to the appropriate fields. Then on to the good stuff: picking out the new system. For this I'm going to need part numbers and prices. No problem. I just click on the button labeled "parts" at the top of the quote and, as if by magic, FileMaker Pro opens up another database, the parts database. Now I get to use FileMaker's powerful search

## — FileMaker basically runs Power Mac Pac —

features. I hit the find button and type "iMac strawberry" into the "description" field. After I hit return, FileMaker lists all of the entries in the database that have those two words—strawberry and iMac—in the description field. Now I can simply click on the part number, drag it over to the quote and drop it in the appropriate field. Hitting return makes FileMaker automatically fill the rest of the information for that part number (the price, description, cost and so forth). FileMaker's ability to have one database link to another this way is what makes it a "relational" database program as opposed to only a "flat file" database. In fact, FileMaker doesn't even have to open the second database to bring its information into the first one. Once the "link" between the files is established, FileMaker will go get the information automatically. For example, if I already knew the part number, I could type it in to my quotes database and FileMaker would go and get the rest of the info from the parts database without having to be asked. Now that's good service.

FileMaker also gives you all sorts of ways to process and organize the information you gather. You can create summary reports, daily reports, any report you want. FileMaker does all the math and sorting behind the scenes. To top it all off, you can assign buttons to the reports so that they're just a click away.

Building a sophisticated form like our quote worksheet is almost as easy as entering data. You can drag and drop objects like buttons or drop-down lists. You can write scripts that make a button function like a macro so that it will perform a string of tasks. For example, our database will compute lease terms based on system price and the length of terms desired. You can also make any word into a hyperlink which can perform an action or get data. We have such links at the top of our quote sheet as shortcuts to other forms and databases. In layout mode, you can move all of these objects around on the page, change fonts, colors, line-weights and sizes. You can add simple graphic elements to improve the usability of your form. In fact, you can even add photos, Quicktime movies or 3D objects to create a live catalog. To make your life easier, FileMaker comes with lots of ready-to-use templates so you don't have create forms from scratch. With all that going for you, there's no excuse for not getting organized.

In short, FileMaker can do just about anything a business needs to get business done. It's one of those programs that reminds us why we love the Mac. It puts a truly impressive amount of computing power at users' fingertips, packaged in an intuitive, easy-to-use interface. Publisher: FileMaker, Inc. (formerly Claris)

Mac Pac Price: \$195

**Quicklinks:** [www.FileMaker.com](http://www.FileMaker.com)

Item	Description	Price	Total
1	Apple iMac G4	1,200.00	1,200.00
2	Apple Keyboard	50.00	50.00
3	Apple Mouse	20.00	20.00
4	Apple Power Adapter	30.00	30.00
5	Apple System Software	0.00	0.00
6	Apple USB Keyboard	40.00	40.00
7	Apple USB Mouse	15.00	15.00
8	Apple USB Power Adapter	25.00	25.00
9	Apple USB System Software	0.00	0.00
10	Apple USB Keyboard	40.00	40.00
11	Apple USB Mouse	15.00	15.00
12	Apple USB Power Adapter	25.00	25.00
13	Apple USB System Software	0.00	0.00

**Our FileMaker Pro miracle worksheet.**