

Paper 247-28

SAS-L – A VERY POWERFUL RESOURCE FOR SAS® USERS WORLDWIDE

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ABSTRACT

SAS-L is an electronic mail discussion group that was developed to allow SAS® users worldwide the potential to communicate with some the best and most powerful SAS users in the world virtually instantaneously via discussion groups or LISTSERV® e-mail servers. Originally SAS-L messages were sent over electronic bulletin board systems, in the days prior to the Internet. Now topics of interest to the SAS® user world are sent via e-mail list servers via the internet. Using SAS-L, a SAS® user can send a message to the LISTSERV®, and a copy of that message is sent through the LISTSERV® e-mail facility to every subscriber to the service, virtually instantaneously, depending on the speed of the server. Responses, comments or correct code soon appear, almost instantaneously.

This can be a very powerful resource for both the beginning SAS® programmer, who might be struggling with a simple syntax question, or for a power SAS user, with a complicated SAS® programming problem. Difficult coding questions can be solved by "SAS-L experts" quickly, virtually before a SAS® programmer has time to look the topic up using a manual. Topics include SAS® programming questions, announcements of interest to the user community, complaints about SAS® Institute, or any subject that is deemed appropriate.

SAS-L is one of the oldest, most successful programming oriented e-mail lists, founded in 1985, at the University of Georgia.¹ While it is "officially" independent of SAS® Institute, SAS® Institute frequently monitors the service to ensure accuracy of the information that is being disseminated.

SAS-L

New users of SAS® software may not be aware of a very powerful free resource that is available to them, the SAS-L LISTSERV®. SAS-L is an electronic mail discussion group LISTSERV® that was developed at the University of Georgia by a guy named Harold that gives users the potential to communicate with some of the best and most powerful SAS® users in the world via the internet.¹

Electronic mailing lists provide a forum for SAS® users to participate in discussions or send and receive e-mail about SAS. A LISTSERV® makes use of a software that manages the distribution of mail to thousands of subscribers called "list servers" or "a LISTSERV®".¹ A list server automatically distributes an e-mail message from one member of a list to all other members on that list. A LISTSERV® is a kind of electronic mail facility, if you will, that allows subscribers to the LISTSERV® to participate in electronic discussion groups on any of thousands of subjects.

If you have an interest in a particular subject, chances are excellent that there is a discussion group on that subject. As of October, 2001, there were 49,014 LISTSERVs (out of over 199,000) catalogued on the CataList® website.² The University of Georgia supports 1,800 such newsgroups for their university administration. Prior to the Internet, discussion groups resided on Bulletin Board software, such as Wildcat Bulletin Board Service, on the UseNet, UseNet was a collection of networked computers, consisting of government, university and corporate computer systems that made use of dial-up modems. The UseNet was the beginning of what has now evolved into the Internet.³

What makes SAS-L so exciting is that it is a rich forum for sharing knowledge. Knowledge Management is the process through which organizations generate value from their intellectual and knowledge-based assets. Some assume that Knowledge Management is Information Technology, but that is not the case. IT facilitates KM. By fostering the free flow of ideas and knowledge, SAS-L is an excellent Knowledge Management tool, and one that every SAS® programmer should take advantage of. What better way to share knowledge than on SAS-L?

And please keep in mind that SAS-L is not just valuable for the new user who is trying to solve a syntax or coding issue. Seasoned SAS programmers are also encouraged to share their expertise and knowledge with other SAS-L participants, and keep the free flow in ideas and information. Those of you

who have expertise in SAS programming and syntax can subscribe to SAS-L and participate in the sharing of knowledge that is the foundation of this LISTSERV®. In the process you would be helping other SAS® programmers worldwide gain a better understanding of the intricacies of the SAS language. In his excellent paper on SAS-L from SUGI 25, “A Personal View of SAS-L as a Teaching Tool”, Ian Whitlock talks about the strength of the SAS-L LISTSERV® as an excellent teaching tool and the wealth of topics and advice that SAS-L provides. Of course, he also cautions that a participant must be able to recognize a good solution from a bad one, but also suggests that SAS-L is self-correcting, in that the group participating on SAS-L sees when poor advice is given, and jump into the discussion to clarify.

Therefore, if you are a new users or someone who enjoys sharing your expertise, SAS-L can be an rich and valuable experience. It is known that those who volunteer their time and expertise gain more from the experience than the people that they are helping. There is a secondary gain inherent in giving of your time or knowledge.

Whether a new users or not, the value of SAS-L apparent after you have tried to research syntax using a standard SAS® manual. Often times, trying to find information in a SAS® manual can be daunting. Sometimes, just figuring out where to look is the major stumbling block. You may know what you want to do, but not how it is referenced in the manual. SAS® manuals are not written to be particularly “user friendly”. In the time it takes to open the manual and begin the arduous process of scanning the index, a SAS® user can search the archives in Google®, or post a question via the SAS-L list-serve and receive a quick answer.

Why reinvent the wheel? There are SAS® experts, waiting to solve SAS® problems, or showcase their SAS® knowledge, for the world to see. Your question will be answered almost immediately, and by several SAS® experts, with possibly several solutions. You can then pick the solution that makes the most sense to you.

So how does SAS-L work? Originally SAS-L messages were sent over electronic bulletin boards, in the days prior to the Internet. Now, topics of interest to the SAS® user world are sent via e-mail LISTSERV® servers over the Internet. SAS-L is a “peered” list, which means that it resides on a number of listservers, and messages on one server will be sent to all LISTSERV servers. This is a very powerful feature of a LISTSERV®. The LISTSERV®

is also “gated” to a newsgroup named comp.soft-sys.sas., which means you can access SAS-L several ways; 1) either subscribing to the LISTSERV®, 2) viewing newsgroups, or lastly, and the most easily accessible way, via the internet on Goggle.com. Goggle® is a search engine that has archived 20 years of Usenet messages on a site called Goggle Groups. This website mirrors the LISTSERV®.⁴

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

You can subscribe officially to SAS-L, and send and receive SAS-L messages directly, by sending a message to: listserv@usa.cc.uga.edu at the University of Georgia, or listserv@listserv.vt.edu at Virginia Polytechnic University, or listserv@AKH-WIEN.AC at the University of Vienna. To subscribe, type: subscribe, space, SAS-L, space and your name on the subject line. No message should be added to the body of the e-mail.

Subject: SUBSCRIBE SAS-L JOHN SMITH

If you deviate at all from this format, the subscription will not be processed. If you have typed the subject line correctly, and your subscription is processed, you will receive a confirmation from the LISTSERV®, with instructions on how to confirm the subscription.

The only disadvantage of being a subscriber is that your e-mail inbox will begin to receive many messages each day – some days upwards of fifty. When a regular subscriber to SAS-L sends a message to the list-serve with a question, a copy of that message is sent to every subscriber to the service, virtually instantaneously, depending on the speed of the server. At present there are several thousand subscribers to SAS-L. Those messages accumulate quickly in your e-mail box, and unless you are diligent, and delete messages regularly, you may exceed your disk quota on your e-mail server.

Accessing SAS-L via Newsgroups

Another option is to be a “casual” subscriber to SAS-L by using newsgroups. This way you can access the information unofficially, without actually subscribing. In order to do this you will need to configure your browser to access the newsreader in your browser, either Netscape® Messenger, or Outlook Express®, in Microsoft’s Explorer®. The name of the newsgroup is comp.soft-sys.sas.

The advantage of being a casual SAS-L “browser” rather than a full-subscribe is that your e-mail quota does not get filled with the large number of e-mails

that are sent each day via the LISTSERV®. For some users, this is an important distinction. Instructions for setting up newsgroups in your environment are more complicated and require knowledge of the name of the news server. Detailed instructions on the one-time setup are included in the appendix.

Note: These instructions will be handed out during the presentation at SUGI in a laminated format that you can take back to your work stations.

Accessing SAS-L on Google

Lastly, you can access information on SAS-L via the google search engine website: www.google.com. Google.com mirrors the Usenet discussion forum, has all postings on SAS-L, so that you can search the archives easily, and even allows you to post a message. Go to the website, and once in Google®, go into Google Groups, the comp, then Next 30 groups, to comp.soft-sys.* and finally comp.soft-sys.sas.

And Google is not the only place where SAS programmers can share resources. In an excellent paper at SUGI 27, Wei Cheng talks about other resources on the internet that are available, including how to search SAS-L using other search engines detailed information on LISTSERV® s, if you've not used this vehicle before. There is even a reference to the General User's Guide to LISTSERV®, so that you can learn to use LISTSERV® correctly. .

Summary

Whether you access SAS-L via the internet, by simply doing a search on Google®, or through newsgroups, or via a subscription, the beauty of SAS-L is the speed with which responses appear. Questions that were sent minutes before are answered. SAS-L can be a most amazingly powerful resource for both the beginning SAS® programmer, who might be struggling with a simple syntax question, or a power user, with a very complex question or difficult esoteric programming problem. Difficult coding questions are usually solved by "SAS-L experts" quickly. And more often than not, there are several solutions. Thus, a new user can pick the solution that makes the most sense to him.

But the true beauty of this facility is the vicarious fun of following the threads, and sometimes the brilliant and resultant humor are well worth the amount of time that is invested in cleaning up unwanted e-mail messages.

While SAS-L is "officially" independent of SAS® Institute, SAS® Institute frequently monitors SAS-L to ensure accuracy of the information that is being disseminated. SAS® employees however, are not encouraged to communicate via SAS-L. This is a list-serve for the SAS® community, not SAS® Institute.

If you attend SUGI 28, there is a BOF – Birds of a Feather – gathering. Be sure to attend. You will have an opportunity to learn more about SAS-L and have an opportunity to meet frequent SAS-L contributors face to face.

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Appendix

Quick Reference To Internet SAS Newsgroup (Get answers to your SAS question today!)

(Make a copy of this, cut it in half, paste it together, and post it on your cubicle wall!)

comp.soft-sys.sas is the newsgroup version of the SAS-L email list and it has several advantages over SAS-L. A Cnewsgroup is a simple way of looking at an email list server – as though it were an email Inbox, like in MS/Outlook Express. It is easy to use, but requires a one-time setup, which is listed further below.

Have a SAS question or problem you can't solve? (1 minute or less)

1. Go to <http://www.google.com> to search the vast history of previous SAS-L questions and answers.
2. Click on *Groups > Advanced Groups Search*
3. Enter key words in your SAS question in the "Find messages" section
4. Enter comp.soft-sys.sas in the "Newsgroup" box
5. Click the *Google Search* button
6. Search results appear.

If that doesn't solve your problem, then "post" your question with your email/newsgroup software (e.g., Outlook Express) (1 minute or less)

1. Open your email/newsgroup browser
2. In the Folders window, click on *comp.soft-sys.sas* (if you have already followed the one-time setup instructions further below, and have "subscribed" to comp.soft-sys.sas).
3. Click the *New Post* button in the upper left
4. Write a short description in the subject line – include a key word or two, e.g. "Proc Means question", or "Convert char to numeric?"

How soon will I get an answer? (30 minutes or more)

1. Wait at least 30 minutes or so before checking the newsgroup again for answers – give others enough time to read and write a reply... some may not get to your question for several days, depending on how busy they are at work.

How do I interact with others in the newsgroup? (1 minute or less)

1. Be bold – go ahead and ask your questions, even/especially if you are a SAS beginner. Other beginners who read it will also benefit!
2. The **F5** key will often serve to "refresh" your email/newsgroup software – you may see new replies and new questions that you didn't see before.
3. To reply to someone who has posted (either to your question, to someone else's question, or to someone's reply, click on *Reply Group*.
4. The only time you should not reply to the group (with the simple *Reply* button which starts an email) is if the topic is somehow confidential, for example – job-related.
5. Be sure to publicly thank those who have offered their help... again by using *Reply Group*.
6. Ignore spam, eloquent appeals from Nigeria, and so on.

7. Help others – read the questions from others that you think you can answer, and help them out.

One-time setup instructions for MS/Internet Explorer/Outlook Express (10 minutes or less)

1. Call your ISP's (MSN, AOL, etc) Tech Support phone number and ask them a) what the name of their news server is, and also b) if that server requires you to log in.
2. In Internet Explorer, select Tools > Mail and News > Read News
3. You may see a window stating that "You are not subscribed to any newsgroups..." Click "No".
4. When Outlook Express appears, select Tools > Accounts
5. You should see a screen which says "Internet Accounts". Click on "Add > News..."
6. Again, You may see a window stating that "You are not subscribed to any newsgroups..." Click "Yes" this time.
7. An Internet Connection Wizard should appear. Type in your name as you want it to appear in newsgroups. "Click Next".
8. Type in the email address you want others to reply to. Click "Next".
9. For the next screen, type in the name of your ISP's news server that you got when you called their Tech Support phone. If they said their server requires you to log on, then of course check that check-box. Click "Next".
10. Click on "Finish", then on "Close".
11. A dialog window asking "Would you like to download newsgroups...?" should appear. Click "No."
12. Close Outlook Express, then restart it (IE6 > Tools > Mail and News > Read News).
13. When the dialog window reappears, click "Yes". It will take a few moments to download all available newsgroups.
14. You should see a Newsgroup Subscriptions dialog window. In the "Display newsgroups which contain:" box, type "comp.soft-sys.sas" as above. Select it in the "All" window below, and click "Go to".
15. You may encounter a sign-in window next, as shown below in the MSN example. Type in your email address and password, then click "OK". You may have click "OK" several times!
16. Finally you should arrive at the comp.soft-sys.sas window. You're in!

