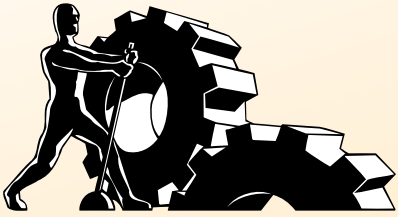


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# Maintaining

# Your Mac

**Joe Kissell**

**SECOND  
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# Read Me First

Welcome to *Take Control of Maintaining Your Mac, Second Edition*, version 2.1, published in March 2011 by TidBITS Publishing Inc. This book was written by Joe Kissell and edited by Caroline Rose.

Macs, like all machines, are prone to break down eventually—in either a physical sense (a component going bad) or a logical sense (files becoming corrupted, applications misbehaving). You can reduce the risk of such problems, and minimize the damage when they do occur, with a regular maintenance regimen. This book contains simple steps you can take to keep your Mac humming.

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## Updates and More

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You can access extras related to this book on the Web (use the link in [Ebook Extras](#), near the end of the book; it’s available only to purchasers). On the ebook’s Take Control Extras page, you can:


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## Basics

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Here are a few “rules of the road” that will help you read this book:

- **Menus:** Where I describe choosing a command from a menu in the menu bar, I use a compact description. For example, to create a new folder in the Finder, you choose New Folder from the File menu; I abbreviate this as “File > New Folder.”
- **Contextual menus:** In Mac OS X, when you hold down the Control key and click, a pop-up *contextual menu* appears, with commands appropriate to whatever is under the mouse pointer. For example, if you Control-click a file in the Finder, you’ll see commands such as Get Info, Duplicate, and Make Alias. Control-clicking nearly always works to open a contextual menu, but your mouse or trackpad might support a better method. The default behavior, the alternative methods, and the ways to set them vary depending on the type of input device; the typical alternative (for right-handed users) is to *right-click* with a mouse—click the right-hand mouse button—so that’s the term this book uses by default for the action that opens a contextual menu.
- **Finding System Preferences:** I sometimes refer to settings in System Preferences that you may want to adjust. To open System Preferences, click its icon in the Dock or choose Apple  > System Preferences. When the System Preferences window opens, click the icon of the pane whose settings you want to adjust. I refer to these panes using an abbreviated notation such as “the Network preference pane.”
- **Finding an application’s preferences:** I often refer to preferences in an application that you may want to adjust. Don’t confuse an application’s preferences with the system-wide settings found in System Preferences. For example, in the program Disk Utility, you would choose Disk Utility > Preferences.
- **Path syntax:** This book occasionally uses a *path* to show the location of a file or folder in your file system. For example, Mac OS X stores most utilities, such as Terminal, in the Utilities folder. The path to Terminal is `/Applications/Utilities/Terminal`.

A slash at the beginning of a path tells you to start from the root level of the disk. You’ll also encounter paths that begin with ~

(tilde), which is a shortcut for the user's home directory. For example, if a person with the user name `joe` wants to install fonts that only he can access, he'll put them in his `~/Library/Fonts` folder, which is just another way of writing `/Users/joe/Library/Fonts`.

- **Volumes and partitions:** I follow Apple's terminology in referring to any disk *or partition on a disk* as a volume. So if a hard disk has not been partitioned, it has just one volume. If a disk has been partitioned, each partition is a volume.

### A Note about My Mac Fitness Books

This book is one of three I've written that involve keeping your Mac healthy and fit. Inevitably, they all overlap slightly, but they have different emphases:

- ◆ This book focuses on preventive maintenance—avoiding future problems, reducing clutter, making your Mac easier to use, and monitoring its ongoing health.
- ◆ *Take Control of Troubleshooting Your Mac* is about solving problems that prevent your Mac from operating properly. It includes basic troubleshooting procedures, ready-made solutions to common complaints, and techniques that can help you diagnose and treat issues the book doesn't cover specifically.
- ◆ *Take Control of Speeding Up Your Mac* goes into great detail about ways to increase your Mac's performance, returning to (or even surpassing) the speed it had when it was brand new. This includes finding and taming rogue processes, improving disk and CPU responsiveness, installing hardware upgrades, optimizing your wireless network, and many other tasks that contribute to overall speed.

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## What's New in Version 2.1

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Although my basic maintenance advice remains essentially the same in this version, two years have passed since the book's previous update. In keeping with the spirit of cleaning out cruft, I've scrubbed the book to purge outdated bits and bring the information in line with current

versions of Mac OS X and third-party software and services. In addition to making these minor changes throughout, I also:

- Added information about the Mac App Store in [Update Third-Party Software](#)
- Increased the amount of RAM I recommend in the sidebar [Be Sure You Have Enough RAM](#)
- Expanded and updated the sidebar [External Drives and Security](#)
- Revamped the section [Consider Clearing Certain Caches](#) to reflect my current recommendations
- Added a sidebar about additional Trash to empty: [Empty Application-Specific Trash, Too](#)
- Updated the instructions to [Check for Take Control Updates](#)
- Removed the section about cleaning your iSight camera as a separate task, and merged that information with [Clean Your Screen](#)
- Revised my advice about the amount of disk space to leave free in [Disk Usage](#)

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## What Was New in the Second Edition

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The second edition was a major revision, extensively updated with the latest information on Mac maintenance. Among the most significant changes are these:

- Updated information about utilities for uninstalling applications, finding large files, and removing duplicates (see [Clean Out Accumulated Cruff](#))
- Revised and expanded conversations with experts on several maintenance topics, plus new conversations about defragmenting disks ([Defragment Your Hard Disk](#)) and using antivirus software ([Install Antivirus Software](#))
- Corrected information on the way periodic maintenance scripts work in Leopard and later (see [Make Sure Scheduled Maintenance Tasks Run](#))

- Completely revised advice on using antivirus software, resulting in moving that discussion from the section on preliminary tasks to [Things You Might Never Need to Do](#)
- A new recommended weekly task ([Empty Your Downloads Folders](#)), monthly task ([Test Your Backups](#)), and yearly task ([Check Your UPS Battery](#))
- A list of software that can assist you in clearing particular caches if the need arises (see [Consider Clearing Certain Caches](#))
- Descriptions of several programs that can monitor your hard drive's S.M.A.R.T. status in [Check Your Drive's S.M.A.R.T. Status](#)

# Introduction

Several years ago, I went to the dentist for the first time in more than half a decade. The main reason I'd failed to make dental appointments all those years was embarrassment at having waited so long. I could just hear the dentist chiding me, "Ah, I can see you haven't had your teeth cleaned properly in 5 years. For shame!" The more time passed, the worse the embarrassment grew, and finally it took actual pain and a visible hole in a tooth to overcome it. So I was disappointed, but not surprised, to learn that I had several cavities and needed a root canal. The dentist was kind and understanding but nevertheless pointed out repeatedly that this visit might have been much less painful (and less expensive) had I flossed every day and gone for my semiannual checkups as I knew I should have.

I tell you this story not merely to urge proper dental hygiene but because maintaining your Mac—like maintaining your teeth, your car, your health, or your home—is a good habit whose rewards are having fewer problems later on and being able to recover more easily from problems that do arise. You can sometimes get away without doing any maintenance for a few months or perhaps much longer, but you risk losing data, wasting time, and having to spend a great deal of money repairing or replacing your computer.

This book teaches you the most important and useful maintenance tasks you should perform to increase your chances of keeping your Mac in tip-top operating condition throughout its lifetime. I've organized the tasks according to their frequency: what you should do daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly, as well as some important initial steps, some things you should do when a Mac OS X upgrade appears, and some tasks you might want to *avoid*, contrary to conventional wisdom. If you follow these recommendations diligently, you'll dramatically decrease the likelihood of serious problems.

I want to make a few disclaimers up front:

- There's no such thing as the One True Way to maintain your Mac. Everyone's situation is unique, so you may need to adapt these instructions to suit your needs—perform certain tasks more often or less often, skip tasks that don't apply to you, and so on. Take

these instructions as guidelines, as a starting point to determine your own maintenance regimen.

- No amount of maintenance can guarantee that you'll never have any problems. Manufacturing defects, malfunctioning software, user errors, and other mishaps can and do occur. Proper maintenance should, however, minimize both the number and the severity of problems you experience.
- This book does not cover troubleshooting or repair; the focus is on preventing problems, not fixing them. If your Mac crashes, loses data, fails to start up, or otherwise behaves improperly, you'll need to look elsewhere for solutions. You might start with either of two companion volumes I've written: *Take Control of Troubleshooting Your Mac* and *Take Control of Speeding Up Your Mac*. I recommend additional places to look in the [Learn More](#) section.

**Note:** To reflect the diversity of opinion about certain maintenance tasks, I've included several sidebars containing brief conversations among Mac experts, some of whom are Take Control authors or editors.

This version of *Take Control of Maintaining Your Mac* is geared toward people using Mac OS X 10.5 Leopard or later. (Although Mac OS X 10.7 Lion hasn't yet been released as I write this, preliminary information suggests that virtually all of the maintenance recommendations I make for Leopard and 10.6 Snow Leopard will apply equally to Lion.) The majority of the information in this book also applies to earlier versions of Mac OS X. Even so, note that one of my first suggestions is to upgrade your Mac to run the latest version of Mac OS X, which is likely to contain fewer bugs than earlier versions.

The tasks in this book are easy, and they get easier the more you do them. So start developing those good maintenance habits right now. And don't forget to floss every day!

# Maintaining Quick Start

This book describes a step-by-step process for maintaining your Mac. The maintenance intervals (daily, weekly, monthly, yearly) reflect the relative urgency of the tasks in each section; you may choose to do the tasks within a section in any order, but I strongly suggest first following the steps in [Start on the Right Foot](#).

## **Get ready:**

- Get your Mac into the best possible shape by updating software, getting rid of old files, setting up a backup system, and performing other preliminary tasks. Read [Start on the Right Foot](#).

## **Perform periodic maintenance tasks:**

- Every day, update your backup archive and download (but don't necessarily install) updates. See [Perform Daily Tasks](#).
- Once a week, perform maintenance such as cleaning up your Desktop, backing up your hard drive, and installing software updates. See [Perform Weekly Tasks](#).
- Once a month, empty your Trash, check your disk for errors, test your backups, do some light cleaning, and exercise your notebook's battery. See [Perform Monthly Tasks](#).
- Once a year, give your Mac a good cleaning inside and out, make extra archival backups, get rid of extraneous files, change your passwords, and more. See [Perform Yearly Tasks](#).

## **Save time by skipping unnecessary work:**

- Learn why you can probably avoid three common maintenance tasks in [Things You Might Never Need to Do](#).

## **Handle Mac OS X upgrades with ease:**

- Learn what you need to know to be ready for the next version of Mac OS X in [When a New Version of Mac OS X Is Released](#).

## **Avoid or fix problems:**

- Catch potential problems early, or troubleshoot them if need be. See [Monitor Your Mac's Health](#) and [Learn More](#).

# Start on the Right Foot

Whether you've just unpacked a shiny new Mac or you're hoping to get an older machine into shape, your first step should be to perform some initial cleanup and preparation tasks. These tasks will help your Mac run better now and will make ongoing maintenance tasks easier.

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## Install the Latest Version of Mac OS X

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If your Mac is already running the latest version of Mac OS X, good for you! Skip to [Turn On Software Update](#) (next). If not, your first step should be to upgrade.

Every release of Mac OS X includes dozens if not hundreds of bug fixes to prevent crashes or other errors and to patch holes that ne'er-do-wells might use to damage or gain access to your system. That fact alone is reason enough to keep up to date. In addition, Apple constantly introduces useful new features, and some newer software runs only on recent versions of the operating system. Often, doing nothing more than updating your system software can eliminate a wide range of problems—and prevent others.

Mac OS X updates fall into two categories: major and minor. Major updates (more properly known as *upgrades*) increment the digit after the first decimal point in the version number: 10.4, 10.5, and 10.6 were all major updates. With rare exceptions, Apple charges money for major updates; historically, the cost has usually been \$129, although Mac OS X 10.6 Snow Leopard was much less expensive (and pricing for 10.7 Lion hasn't yet been announced at press time). Minor updates increment the digit after the second decimal point: 10.6.5, 10.6.6, and 10.6.7 were all minor updates. Minor updates are free.

You should always download and install every minor update. (However, I suggest waiting a few days after an update appears to make sure it doesn't contain any serious errors; see [Check Software Updates](#), later.) The easiest way to do so is to use Software Update (see [Turn On Software Update](#), next). Major upgrades are less urgent, because they focus on new features; nevertheless, since they also fix

# Perform Daily Tasks

If you performed all the preliminary steps in [Start on the Right Foot](#), your daily maintenance ritual consists of at most two tasks, and at best, none!

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## Back Up Changed Files

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In the type of backup system I recommend, your backup software stores all your important files (or better yet, all your files, period) on some sort of external media—preferably a hard drive. At a minimum, you should be sure your backup program makes a daily copy of any files you could not re-create in a matter of minutes, such as your saved email, photographs, and any documents you’ve spent hours working on during the day.

I advocate performing *versioned backups*. This means that after your first full backup of all the files you want, each successive backup copies only those files that are new, or have changed, since the last time. And it keeps the previous copies of the files, so you can go back to an earlier version if you accidentally modify a file you shouldn’t have (plus, files you delete on your hard disk remain in the backup).

**Note:** In addition to automated daily backups, it never hurts to make extra copies of files you’re actively working on. If you take a moment to drag such files to a network server, Dropbox, or iDisk whenever you stop to take a break, you’ll add yet another layer of safety.

If you’re using Time Machine or any of the numerous backup programs that work continuously in the background, or if you configured your backup software to run on a schedule (see [Set Up a Backup System](#)), this happens automatically and you need not take any explicit action. You may, however, need to intervene in some cases, such as these:

- If you back up to optical discs, in which case you must insert new media as requested
- If you back up to a server that requires you to log in manually

# Perform Weekly Tasks

Your daily maintenance tasks are minor—and perhaps even happen automatically. Once a week, however, you should set aside time for some more in-depth housekeeping. Depending on your work habits and system specifications, these weekly tasks might take 15 minutes or they might take a couple of hours. If you find that you can't finish them all conveniently in one sitting, feel free to stagger them—one each day of the week, for example—as long as any given task occurs about once every week.

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## Clean Up Your Desktop

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I want to ask you a personal question. How many icons—not counting hard disks, network volumes, and removable media—are on your Desktop right now? (My answer: three, though I usually try to keep it closer to zero. Ask me again tomorrow, after I've performed my weekly housekeeping.) I know lots of people who regularly have dozens or even hundreds of icons on their Desktops, who use it as a catchall for downloaded files, work in progress, email enclosures, and everything else that needs a temporary home. This is a bad idea! Here's why:

- Mac OS X considers every icon on your Desktop a window, and because every window uses up a certain amount of RAM, more Desktop icons means greater RAM usage.
- Exposé shortcuts notwithstanding, putting files and folders on your Desktop makes them harder to find, because they're so easily hidden behind windows. (You can access the contents of your Desktop folder in a regular Finder window, but lots of people put items on the Desktop to avoid working with Finder windows.)
- Your Desktop displays files and folders in icon view, unlike the more efficient list and column views available in other windows. (Yes, I know, you can view the contents of your Desktop folder in a window too, but work with me here...)
- Tossing lots of files into a single big storage area (wherever it may be) creates more work later on when you try to locate specific files.

# Perform Yearly Tasks

If you've ever looked around your home and thought, "It's time for a good spring cleaning," you know the value of decluttering. On your computer, as in your home, make an annual ritual of removing dirt, tossing out junk, and putting your belongings in order. Besides giving you a cleaner, more inviting environment, these yearly tasks can extend your computer's life span and help keep your data safe.

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## De-Dust Your Mac

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Nearly all Mac models employ one or more internal cooling fans. Without them, your computer would overheat, leading to crashes, erratic behavior, and possibly even permanent damage to sensitive components.

But as the fans pull air into the computer, they also pull in dust. Dust can accumulate on the air intake vents, on the fan itself, or on any surface along the flow of air within the computer. When a layer of dust sits atop a hot component, it acts as an insulator, preventing some of the heat from escaping into the air. And if dust blocks the air flow, the heat that does escape has nowhere to go. Either way, your fan must work harder, which not only makes it noisier but also makes it suck in even more dust.

In short, dust is no friend of computers. By the simple act of getting rid of the dust, you can make your Mac cooler and quieter—and prevent all sorts of unpleasant problems.

You can remove dust by brushing or wiping, by vacuuming, or by blowing it off with compressed air. The compressed-air approach is the least desirable, because it puts the dust right back into the air. I prefer an ordinary vacuum cleaner with a hose attachment, but before using such a vacuum on the *inside* of your computer, note of the warning just ahead. If you choose the brushing or wiping approach, be sure to use a *soft, dry* cloth or brush—and a gentle touch.

# Things You Might Never Need to Do

Careful readers may have noticed that I omitted two common tasks from my maintenance regimen: repairing permissions and defragmenting disks. In addition, I haven't recommended installing antivirus software. Read this section to discover why you might never need to do these things—or whether you're one of the few people who should.

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## Repair Permissions

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If you visit Mac discussion forums and news sites, you've probably seen repeated recommendations to use Disk Utility's Repair Disk Permissions feature. Some people recommend repairing permissions on a daily basis, or before and after every software installation, or as a first troubleshooting step when any sort of problem arises. Anecdotes abound about the magical curative (or prophylactic) properties of this feature, so it has achieved a mythical status—in much the same way rebuilding the desktop file was a standard cure-all under Mac OS 9.

At the risk of being labeled a heretic, I'd like to suggest that in most cases repairing permissions is nothing more than a placebo. True, the procedure can solve certain problems and rarely does any harm, but as a routine maintenance task, I consider it a waste of time. To explain why, I should provide a bit of background.

In Mac OS X, each file contains information specifying which users (or parts of the system) can read it, modify it, or execute it. This information is collectively known as *permissions*. If a file has incorrect permissions, it can cause applications to misbehave in various ways, such as crashing or failing to launch.

Ordinarily, installers set the correct permissions for the files they install, and the permissions stay that way permanently. However, a poorly written installer can mess up permissions—even for files it did not install—and if you use Unix commands such as `chown` and `chmod`,

# When a New Version of Mac OS X Is Released

Every couple of years or so, Apple rolls out a major update to Mac OS X. As I write this in the first half of 2011, Mac OS X 10.7 Lion is expected soon, and no doubt Apple has already started work on the next “big cat.” I’d like to share some advice you should follow whenever Apple releases a major new version of Mac OS X.

**Note:** Even more important than the major upgrades is keeping up with minor Mac OS X updates, because these often fix serious problems. For details, read [Install the Latest Version of Mac OS X](#) and [Use Software Update to Install Apple Updates](#).

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## Buy It!

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For the past several years, Apple has (with rare exceptions) charged \$129 for major Mac OS X upgrades. As much as we might all wish they were less expensive, I suggest adding that amount to your budget right now; ultimately, you’ll get much more than your money’s worth. Major upgrades invariably contain features that enable you to get more done in less time and with less effort. So plan to make that investment, and it won’t seem like such a big deal when the time comes.

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## Buy *Take Control of Upgrading to...*

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On the day Apple shipped Mac OS X 10.6 Snow Leopard, TidBITS Publishing also released [Take Control of Upgrading to Snow Leopard](#), a book I wrote that walks you through every step of the upgrading process. I’d previously written *Take Control of Upgrading to Panther*, *Take Control of Upgrading to Tiger*, and *Take Control of Upgrading to Leopard*, and I’ve got *Take Control of Upgrading to Lion* in the works. I write these books based on weeks of extensive testing and dozens of installations on numerous test machines.

# Monitor Your Mac's Health

No matter how diligently you perform the maintenance tasks in this book, you won't truly know how well (or how poorly) your Mac is running unless you make the effort to find out. The fact that no smoke is billowing from your SuperDrive is a good sign, of course, but it's hardly definitive proof that all is well. In this section, I show you how to find out what's going on under the hood.

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## Use Monitoring Utilities

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Numerous utilities (most of them free) can provide up-to-the-minute statistics about your Mac. In most cases, these programs run in the background all the time, but if you prefer, you can run them manually when you get curious about your Mac's current state. I provide a list of several such utilities just ahead (see [Monitoring Utilities](#)). But first, you should understand what data you might want to monitor and why.

### RAM Usage

Mac OS X usually manages your computer's RAM efficiently for the most part. Applications can dynamically adjust the amount of memory they use, and even if all your RAM is actively in use, a virtual memory system lets Mac OS X use a portion of your hard disk to extend your RAM, automatically swapping (or "paging") data between the disk and the physical RAM as needed. Even so, if you have enough applications open at once, and if they require enough memory to perform their respective tasks, you can reach a point where data swapping occurs constantly. This slows everything way down, and it uses disk space.

You should also be aware of a type of bug known as a *memory leak*. Applications usually ask the system for a certain amount of memory for any given task and then give it back when they're done. Sometimes, due to a programming error, an application keeps taking memory and not returning any, so that by doing nothing more than staying open, it chews up more and more RAM. You can recover the used memory by

# Learn More

I wish I could promise you that by following the suggestions in this book, you'll never experience any problems with your Mac. You will lessen the likelihood and perhaps the severity of problems, but things still can and will go wrong. If, when an application crashes, your hard disk won't mount or sparks shoot out of the case, you need more help than I can give you here. But allow me to suggest some places you might look for solutions.

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## Web Sites

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- **Apple's support site:** Your first stop should be Apple's official support site, where you can search for FAQs, technical notes, and downloads that may address your problem.  
<http://www.apple.com/support/>
- **Apple's discussion forums:** Another Mac user may have discovered, and solved, a similar problem. Connect with other users at these forums.  
<http://discussions.apple.com/>
- **MacFixIt:** Check the MacFixIt site daily for information about newly identified problems and solutions for all sorts of Mac hardware and software.  
<http://reviews.cnet.com/macfixit/>
- **MacInTouch:** Keep current with Mac news and real-world reports from users around the world.  
<http://www.macintouch.com/>
- **MacOSXHints:** This site is geared more toward tips and tricks than troubleshooting, but it does contain solutions to many unusual problems as well.  
<http://www.macosxhints.com/>

# About This Book

Thank you for purchasing this Take Control book. We hope you find it both useful and enjoyable to read. We welcome your comments at [tc-comments@tidbits.com](mailto:tc-comments@tidbits.com).

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## About the Author

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Joe Kissell is Senior Editor of *TidBITS*, a Web site and email newsletter about Apple and the Internet, and the author of numerous print and electronic books about Macintosh software, including [Take Control of Mac OS X Backups](#) and [Take Control of Maintaining Your Mac](#). He is also a Senior Contributor to *Macworld*, was the winner of a 2009 Neal award for Best How-to Article, and has appeared on the MacTech 25 list (the 25 people voted most influential in the Macintosh community) since 2007. Joe has worked in the Mac software industry since the early 1990s, including positions managing software development for Nisus Software and Kensington Technology Group.

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their son, Soren, and their cat, Zora. To contact Joe about this book, send him email at [jwk@me.com](mailto:jwk@me.com) and include [Take Control of Maintaining Your Mac](#) in the subject so his spam filters won't intercept it. Better yet, if appropriate, post your question publicly in our forums at <http://www.getsfatisfaction.com/takecontrolbooks/>.



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## Author's Acknowledgments

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## Shameless Plug

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Although I write about computers as my day job, I have a great many other interests, which I write about on several Web sites, including [Interesting Thing of the Day](#) and my personal blog. You can find links to all my sites, a complete list of my publications, and more personal details about me at [JoeKissell.com](http://JoeKissell.com). You can also follow me on Twitter ([@joekissell](#)).

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## About the Publisher

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Publishers Adam and Tonya Engst have been creating Apple-related content since they started the online newsletter *TidBITS*, in 1990. In *TidBITS*, you can find the latest Apple news, plus read reviews, opinions, and more (<http://www.tidbits.com/>). Adam and Tonya are known in the Apple world as writers, editors, and speakers. They are also parents to Tristan, who thinks ebooks about clipper ships and castles would be cool.



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