

# Take Control

## *of* Troubleshooting Your Mac

*by* Joe Kissell

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This is a free sample of "Take Control of Troubleshooting Your Mac."  
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## READ ME FIRST

Welcome to *Take Control of Troubleshooting Your Mac*, version 1.0.

Macs are easy to use, but they can experience problems like any other machine. When something goes wrong with your Mac, use this book to discover the solution. This book was written by Joe Kissell, edited by Adam Engst, and published by TidBITS Publishing Inc.

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### Basics

In reading this book, you may get stuck if you don't know certain basic facts about working with your Mac or if you don't understand Take Control syntax for things like working with menus or finding items in the Finder. Please note the following:

- **Path syntax:** I may use a *path* to show the location of a file or folder. Path text is formatted in bold type. For example, Tiger stores most utilities in the Utilities folder. The path to the Terminal utility is: **/Applications/Utilities/Terminal**. The slash at the start of the path tells you to start from the root level of the disk.

Some paths begin with ~ (tilde), a shortcut for any user's home directory. For example, if a person with the user name **joe** wants to install a preference pane that only he can access, he would copy it to his **~/Library/PreferencePanes** folder, which is another way of writing **/Users/joe/Library/PreferencePanes**.

- **Menus:** When I describe choosing a command from a menu in the menu bar, I use an abbreviated description. For example, the abbreviated description for the menu command that opens a new window in the Finder is "File > New Finder Window."
- **Finding preferences:** I often refer to system-wide preferences that you may want to adjust. To change these settings, choose System Preferences from the Apple menu, and then click the icon for the preference you want to modify. For example, when you click Network, you go to the Network pane of System Preferences.

## INTRODUCTION: DON'T PANIC!

You've always heard that Macs are easy to use and less prone to misadventures than Windows PCs. And that's true. But they're still only machines. And sure enough, one day it happens: you encounter a serious problem with your Mac and have no idea what to do. Perhaps, since you're reading this book, that day is today.

Repeat after me: Everything is going to be all right. Now take a deep breath and try again, this time with feeling! *Everything is going to be all right.* I want you to believe that. Even if you're feeling kind of panicked right now because your Mac is doing something wonky and you're facing a deadline, I want you to set aside your anxiety for just a moment.

Almost every Mac problem you may encounter has a solution. True, some solutions are more elusive, more time-consuming, or more expensive, than others, but still: don't worry. I've been solving problems with Macs for 15 years, and I'm here to tell you that solutions come more easily when you have a clear head and approach a problem systematically. That's what this book helps you to do.

Make yourself a nice cup of tea. (Keep the tea away from your Mac, by the way—let's not add to your problems, eh?) Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Then page through this book to learn the most efficient way to deal with whatever difficulties you may be experiencing.

I've seen more than one Mac troubleshooting book that was upwards of 600 pages long, and troubleshooting Web sites with thousands of pages of suggestions. By contrast, this book makes no attempt to be comprehensive, because merely listing vast numbers of problems and their accompanying solutions doesn't help one bit if you have a different problem or don't realize how your problem is like some other one. What I hope to do, then, is show you some handy troubleshooting techniques, provide instructions for solving several common problems, and then help you figure out what to do when a problem's cause or solution isn't immediately apparent. In other words, I want to teach you how to be your own technical support person—to do what I do when something goes wrong with one of my Macs.

Because my focus here is on getting your computer back into working order, I intentionally skip over lots of background information and technical details. So don't worry if you're unsure exactly *why* some technique solves your problem. If you're really interested in the deep background, some exploration on the Web will probably turn up oodles of detail.

As confident as I am that most Mac problems have straightforward solutions, I must point out that some problems can't be solved with a few mouse clicks or other clever fiddling. If flames are shooting out of your Mac or the screen is in a thousand pieces, you'll need more help than I can provide here. Even simpler hardware problems, such as a faulty component on your logic board or a busted power cable, may require a trip to the repair shop. And a few—very few—hardware problems are either entirely beyond repair or more costly to repair than is worthwhile. Nevertheless, don't panic. By the time you finish this book, you'll not only know how to solve most problems, you'll have the tools and techniques you need to prevent many problems in the first place, or at least to nip them in the bud. And even if you have a problem that requires professional help, following the steps in this book will help you talk to a repair person more effectively.

If you don't have any problems right now and are merely reading this to prepare yourself for future mishaps, good for you! You'll especially appreciate the information in the first couple of sections about preventing problems and preparing for an emergency.

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***Font of knowledge:*** One large category of Mac trouble I don't cover here is font misbehavior. If you need help troubleshooting a font-related problem, read Sharon Zardetto Aker's *Take Control of Font Problems in Mac OS X* (<http://www.takecontrolbooks.com/font-problems-macosx.html>).

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## QUICK START TO TROUBLESHOOTING YOUR MAC

When your Macintosh has problems, you undoubtedly want to jump right to the solution. So feel free to skip immediately to [Solve Common Problems](#) and see if your symptom is listed there. If not, and time permitting, I recommend reading this book in order, because earlier sections provide useful background information for later sections. However, you may also try the steps in [Troubleshoot Novel Problems](#), following the cross-references as necessary to earlier parts of the book where certain procedures are described in detail.

### **Prepare for trouble:**

- Even if your Mac is healthy now, take steps to keep it that way. Read [Prevent Problems](#).
- When your Mac starts acting up, you'll be glad to already have a toolkit with which you can diagnose and fix it. Learn what you need to have on hand in [Prepare for an Emergency](#).
- Most of the steps you'll go through when a problem occurs rely on several common procedures. Learn how to do these tasks before problems arise so that fixing them will be easier. See [Learn Basic Troubleshooting Procedures](#).

### **Solve problems:**

- If your Mac misbehaves, the problem may be something that many other people have experienced (and that's easily repaired). Start with [Solve Common Problems](#).
- Not all problems are common. If you encounter something not covered in the previous section, learn how to solve it—or find someone who can—in [Troubleshoot Novel Problems](#).

### **Find more information:**

- For further instruction in troubleshooting, check out the electronic or printed books in [Learn More](#).

## PREVENT PROBLEMS

Although this book is mainly about solving problems, not preventing them, I'm sure you don't want any issues you've fixed to recur. And a few preventive steps can also make solving problems much, much easier if and when they do occur.

At the risk of sounding overly promotional, I would like to note that some of my other books (chiefly *Take Control of Mac OS X Backups* and *Take Control of Maintaining Your Mac*) provide a great deal of advice that will help you prevent problems, and I certainly recommend those titles if you need additional help. In this section, though, I cover three particularly important preventive maintenance tasks.

<http://www.takecontrolbooks.com/backup-macosx.html>

<http://www.takecontrolbooks.com/maintaining-mac.html>

### Use a Surge Protector

Surge protectors are to a computer what airbags are to a passenger in a car. No matter how carefully you drive, another driver could cause a collision—and that airbag could save your life. Likewise, no matter how clean or reliable the power in your building normally is, a lightning strike or power surge could damage components or even wipe out your computer. It's unlikely, but it can and does happen.

Considering how inexpensively you can buy a surge protector, using one is common sense. If you haven't already done so, spend a few dollars to prevent hundreds or thousands of dollars worth of damage. (Still, don't buy the cheapest surge protector you can find, which may not offer enough protection. Get one that includes a warranty covering damage to your computer in the event of a power surge.)

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***Path of least resistance:*** *A lightning strike can also travel through phone lines or Ethernet cables. If your computer has such cables attached, I recommend purchasing a surge protector with the necessary jacks to protect your computer from these additional sources of potential damage.*

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And, if you can afford it, consider an uninterruptible power supply (UPS), which includes not only significantly better protection from power surges but a battery that can keep your Mac running for minutes or hours during a power interruption.

## PREPARE FOR AN EMERGENCY

You probably carry a spare tire, a jack, and jumper cables in your car (perhaps along with the phone number for roadside service). These sorts of basic problem-solving tools are just common sense. If you don't have comparable tools for your Mac, you'll be in a pickle if and when a problem occurs. Don't get stranded without the means to get back up and running again.

All the items in this section can come in handy when a problem occurs. You might not use them all, but I've used each of them at one time or another, and I've found them all to be sound investments.

### Acquire a Secondary Startup Volume

You can't replace your car's oil filter while the engine is running—it would not only be messy but it could potentially ruin the engine. Similarly, some repairs can't be done when your Mac is running from a disk that's experiencing problems. In these cases, you must start your Mac from another volume. You may also need to start from another volume if your internal hard drive dies completely.

A secondary startup volume can take numerous forms. I prefer an external FireWire drive, because it's fast, flexible, and can be used for things other than starting up in an emergency. But that is just one of several options. Be sure you have at least one of these handy:

- A bootable CD or DVD, such as a Mac OS X Install DVD or an emergency repair disc from DiskWarrior or TechTool Pro.  
<http://www.alsoft.com/DiskWarrior/>  
[http://www.micromat.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=83](http://www.micromat.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=83)
- A solid-state disk, such as Micromat's \$229 TechTool Protégé  
[http://www.micromat.com/inext.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=34&Itemid=49](http://www.micromat.com/inext.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=34&Itemid=49)

## LEARN BASIC TROUBLESHOOTING PROCEDURES

If I were teaching you how to cook, I'd start by making sure you knew the basic techniques you'd be repeating many times: how to julienne vegetables, deglaze a pan, cream butter, roast poultry, and so on. That way, when we got to specific recipes later, I could simply say, "sweat the aromatics in butter and puree the tomatoes" without having to explain the meanings of words like "sweat," "aromatics," and "puree."

I want to do the same thing in this section: make sure you have a grasp of all the procedures that come up in many different Mac troubleshooting tasks. Then, when I describe the specific steps you'll follow to solve various problems, I can say, "start up in Safe Mode" without having to spell out that process every time. And of course, you can always follow links back here if you need a reminder of what I'm talking about.

If you've been using Macs for any length of time, you may raise your eyebrows at some of the procedures just ahead. "Restart Your Mac? Is he kidding? Who doesn't know how to restart a Mac?" But please read through those sections anyway, because they include details that may not be obvious (such as what to do if the usual means of restarting doesn't work).

### Restart Your Mac

Restarting is the most powerful Mac troubleshooting technique I know. This simple procedure can resolve a huge variety of crashes, hangs, and other problems. It may not be the first thing you should try (because it takes a few minutes), but it should certainly be high on your list. So when the need to restart arises, try each of these methods in turn until you succeed:

1. **The menu command:** choose Restart from the Apple menu. When the confirmation alert appears, click the Restart button.

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**Quicker restarting:** Another way to restart is to press your computer's power button, which displays a dialog with four buttons (Restart, Sleep, Cancel, and Shut Down). When this dialog appears, you can either click the Restart button or simply press the R key to restart immediately, without the confirmation alert.

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Mac OS X then instructs all running applications and background processes to quit. After a few seconds (or, in some cases, as long as a few minutes—if whatever’s running takes a while to respond), the screen goes blank, the startup chime plays, and the Mac restarts.

In some situations, restarting in this way isn’t possible. Perhaps the Apple menu never drops down, or your Mac is completely frozen and won’t respond at all. Or maybe the Restart command appears to take, but 10 minutes later the machine is still chugging away. When this happens, move on to...

## 2. The keyboard shortcut:

- If your keyboard has a power button, hold down Command and Control and press the power button.
- If your keyboard doesn’t have a power button, hold down Command and Control and press the eject key (typically found in the upper right corner of the keyboard, and if it’s not labeled, try either F12 or F15). Usually this method causes your Mac to restart immediately.

If that doesn’t work, try...

3. **The brute-force method:** press and hold the Mac’s power button (sometimes the power button on Apple monitors works too) for approximately 10 seconds, or until the power light goes out completely. (If you don’t hold it long enough, you may just put your computer to sleep, as indicated by a pulsating power light.) Then press the power button again to turn your Mac back on.

## Force-Quit an Application

When an application gets stuck and its regular Quit command won’t work, you can usually quit it using Mac OS X’s Force Quit feature. To do this, press Command-Option-Escape (or choose Force Quit from the Apple menu). Select the program you want to quit and click Force Quit. You can then close the Force Quit Applications window.

**TIP** You can often force-quit a stuck application without the Force Quit Applications window. Option-click its Dock icon and choose Force Quit from the pop-up menu to quit the application.

## SOLVE COMMON PROBLEMS

Now that you have some basic problem-solving techniques under your belt, it's time to move on to some specific problems. I realize that many problems you may encounter aren't mentioned here (in which case, move on to [Troubleshoot Novel Problems](#)), but these are nine of the most common Mac problems for which there's a straightforward path to a solution.

### Your Computer Won't Turn On

One day you sit down at your Mac and press the power button, but instead of the reassuring startup chime you hear nothing. No power light, a blank screen—no sign of life. This is an especially good time to remember not to panic. Take a deep breath and follow these steps:

1. Check the entire electrical path. Start with the power cord where it connects to your Mac and make sure it's firmly seated. Then make sure the other end is plugged in tightly. If you have anything else between the plug and the wall outlet—such as an outlet strip, surge protector, or UPS—check each of the plugs along the chain. While you're at it, check for crimps or sharp angles in the cords, which could mean broken wires inside. If you find or suspect a broken wire, replace the cord. (Also keep in mind that if you were using a surge protector and there was a lightning strike or power surge, it may have sacrificed itself to protect your Mac. Be sure to check its failure indicator.) If all the connections look good, try plugging a lamp or other device into the same outlet as your computer to verify that the juice is flowing. If not, check your building's circuit breakers. If it still won't turn on...
2. Unplug everything from the computer except the keyboard, mouse, and display. Press the power key again. If it turns on, suspect a faulty peripheral. If not...
3. Reset the computer's PMU, SMU, or SMC (if appropriate). (See [Reset PMU, SMU, SMC, NVRAM, or PRAM](#) for details.) Obviously, you can't perform a procedure that requires you to hold down keys while starting up if you can't start up, but most of these resets can be done without power.

If none of these procedures brings your Mac back to life, it's time to call a repair person. See [Go to the source](#).

### WHAT IF YOUR COMPUTER KEEPS TURNING ITSELF OFF?

Perhaps the problem isn't that your computer won't turn on, but that it keeps turning itself off when you don't want it to. This *could* signal a problem with your computer's power supply or logic board. In particular, some iMac G5 models had a manufacturing defect that resulted in this symptom and required replacement of the defective parts (both my wife and I had models with this issue—and we were *extremely* glad they were covered by AppleCare!).

However, before taking your computer in to the shop for a potentially expensive repair, try the following:

- Check to see that the power cord is firmly seated (on both ends), and if your computer is plugged into an outlet strip, make sure that's also plugged in securely.
- Carefully check the settings in the Energy Saver pane of System Preferences. In particular, click the Schedule button and verify that your computer is not set to shut down automatically.
- [Start Up in Safe Mode](#) and run your computer for a while to see if the problem recurs.
- Reset all the nonvolatile memory (see [Reset PMU, SMU, SMC, NVRAM, or PRAM](#)).

If your Mac keeps shutting itself off (or restarting randomly), it's time to take it in for repair.

### You Experience Repeated Kernel Panics

When an individual application crashes, it's annoying but at least the rest of Mac OS X usually continues to function. But occasionally, you may find that your screen dims, your computer no longer responds to your keyboard or mouse, and a message like the one in **Figure 8** appears on your screen. What's happening is known as a *kernel panic*—a type of low-level, system-wide crash that Mac OS X can't recover from.

## TROUBLESHOOT NOVEL PROBLEMS

Sooner or later, you're bound to encounter some problem you haven't experienced before, and which the previous section doesn't cover. Although I've seen hundreds of different things go wrong with Macs over the years, I still run across novel problems all the time. If the solution to some problem isn't immediately obvious, I go through a series of steps to narrow down the possible causes and test remedies until I find one that works. That's what I want to teach you to do here.

First, I ask you to try some easy all-purpose solutions. But at a certain point, you may need to look further for help. I describe how to get more information and troubleshooting advice from a number of different sources.

### Try the Standard Quick Fixes

If I get a headache, I generally take a couple of over-the-counter pain relievers. If the headache goes away, I don't worry about the cause; I just get on with my day. Only if it doesn't go away, or recurs, or accompanies other symptoms, will I call my doctor. Lots of Mac problems fall into the same category. You can try any or all of several all-purpose procedures that tend to zap lots of common irritations. If the problem goes away, there's no need to waste time tracking down its exact cause, but if the quick fixes don't work or the problem comes back, you can move on to more detailed troubleshooting (see [Ask the Right Questions](#), next).

### Quick fixes for application misbehavior

One of the most frequent Mac problems is an application that fails to launch, refuses to open a certain document, has display problems, or otherwise starts behaving erratically. If this happens to you, try each of these procedures in turn until the problem disappears:

1. **Quit and try again:** if a program isn't cooperating in any way, quit it, reopen it, and then test to see if the problem is still there.
2. **Force-quit the application:** if the problem remains, or if the application won't quit normally, force-quit it and open it again (see [Force-Quit an Application](#)). If it doesn't work the first time, it's worth trying this procedure a few times in a row.

## LEARN MORE

Besides the Web sites listed in [Check Mac Troubleshooting Sites](#), a few other resources may be of interest.

### **Ebook:**

- *Troubleshooting Mac OS X* by “Dr. Smoke” (Gregory A. Swain) is a 600-page ebook that goes into great detail about solving a wide variety of Mac problems.  
<http://www.thexlab.com/book/troubleshootingmacosx.html>  
(\$20)

### **Printed books:**

- *Mac OS X Help Line, Tiger Edition* by Ted Landau and Dan Frakes contains a wealth of troubleshooting and repair information.  
<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0321334299/> (\$50 retail; current Amazon.com price, \$33)
- *Mac OS X Tiger For Dummies* by Bob LeVitus contains a section on Networking & Troubleshooting.  
<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0764576755/> (\$22 retail; current Amazon.com price, \$15)

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

In contrast to traditional print books, Take Control ebooks offer clickable links, full-text searching, and free minor updates. We hope you find them both useful and enjoyable to read.

### About the Author

Joe Kissell is Senior Editor of *TidBITS*, a weekly electronic newsletter about the Macintosh and the Internet, and the author of numerous print and electronic books about Mac software, including *Real World Mac Maintenance and Backups* (Peachpit, 2007), *Take Control of Running Windows on a Mac*, and *Take Control of .Mac*. He's also a frequent contributor to *Macworld* magazine. Joe has worked in the Mac software industry since the early 1990s, including positions managing software development for Nisus Software and Kensington Technology Group. He also helps run an Internet publishing business called alt concepts. (<http://alt.cc/>).



In his increasingly imaginary spare time, Joe likes to travel, cook, and practice t'ai chi. By the middle of 2007, Joe and his wife, Morgen, will have moved from San Francisco to Paris, where they plan to live for several years. To contact Joe about this book, send him email at [jwk@mac.com](mailto:jwk@mac.com) and include **Take Control of Troubleshooting Your Mac** in the subject of your message so his spam filters won't intercept it. *But please note: While Joe can answer some questions related to this book, he is unable to provide free troubleshooting help.*

### Author's Acknowledgements

Numerous other Take Control authors, editors, and hangers-on offered suggestions and tips that made this a much better book.

### Shameless Plug

Although I write about computers as my day job, I have a great many other interests, which I write about on several Web sites.

**Interesting Thing of the Day** is my virtual museum of interesting things. Topics include unusual or intriguing discoveries in food, travel, technology, language, philosophy, science, history, and more. Please click on over to <http://itotd.com/> and visit.



**SenseList** is a compendium of lists. Some stem from unlikely connections between seemingly ordinary things; others aim to solve problems or simply satisfy your curiosity. Ranging from whimsical to practical, these lists create order out of the chaos of everyday life. With so much information out there, SenseList makes sense of the world, one list at a time. You can find it at <http://senselist.com/>.

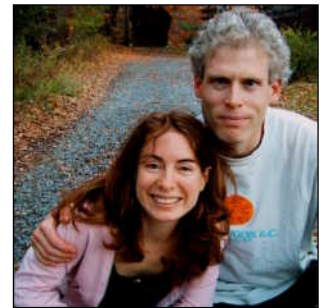


In **The Geeky Gourmet** you can read about culinary science, cooking gadgets, and other topics relating to food and technology. You'll even find the occasional recipe! The site is located at <http://geekygourmet.com/>.

Last but not least is my personal blog, **I Am Joe's Blog**. Learn what it's like to be me at <http://IAMJoesBlog.com/>.

## About the Publisher

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- Editor: Adam Engst, <http://www.tidbits.com/adam/>
- Editor in Chief: Tonya Engst, <http://www.tidbits.com/tonya/>
- Publisher: Adam Engst, <http://www.tidbits.com/adam/>

## *Take Control of Troubleshooting Your Mac*

ISBN: 1-933671-29-7

June 2007, Version 1.0

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TidBITS Electronic Publishing

50 Hickory Road

Ithaca, NY 14850 USA

<http://www.takecontrolbooks.com/>

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## FEATURED TITLES

Now that you've seen this book, you know that Take Control books have a great layout and real-world info that puts you in control. Click any book image below or [visit our Web catalog](#) to add to your book collection!

### Take Control of Font Problems in Mac OS X

by Sharon Zardetto Aker

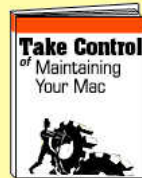


Troubleshooting steps and real-world advice helps you solve pesky font problems easily.

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### Take Control of Maintaining Your Mac

by Joe Kissell

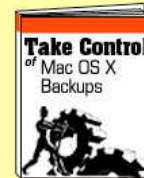


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**\$10**

### Take Control of Mac OS X Backups

by Joe Kissell



Create a rock-solid backup strategy so you can restore quickly and completely, no matter what the catastrophe.

**\$10**

### Take Control of Permissions in Mac OS X

by Brian Tanaka

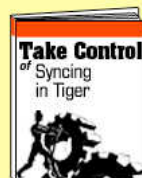


Solve quirky problems, increase privacy, and share files better by managing Mac OS X permissions.

**\$10**

### Take Control of Syncing in Tiger

by Michael E. Cohen



Learn how to synchronize all your data between Macs, or with mobile phones, PDAs, and iPods.

**\$10**

### More Titles!

Delve into even more topics, including:

- Running your Mac—upgrading, customizing, user accounts, fonts, and sharing files.
- Buying gear—Macs, cameras, and digital TVs.
- More topics—.Mac, email, spam, podcasting, AirPort, 802.11n, Wi-Fi security, domain names, GarageBand, Microsoft Office, and even Thanksgiving dinner!

This is a free sample of "Take Control of Troubleshooting Your Mac."  
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