

Crabby gets over her database fears with the help of Access 2007

Applies to: Microsoft Office Access 2007, Access 2003



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Crabby Office Lady

I was asked to write about Access 2007, so my timidity toward using and creating databases had to be squelched — for the time being, anyway. But then, when I began to see how easy it was using Access 2007, well, I considered changing jobs (not really, but I did begin to see the light about why Access users are so loyal to the product).

When I sat down to write this column, I wanted to be...witty. I wanted to make this particular program sound...sexy. And why not? Why can't a piece of software be...sexy? (And why do I have the word "sexy" three times in three adjacent sentences? But more important, will this word end up on my editor's cutting room floor, and will we finally come to blows?)

Just in case that might happen, let's try a "safer" approach.

When you need to *find* something, delve *into* it, view its *secrets*, discover its *capabilities*, wander around the *fullness* of its *promises*...do you cry "Open sesame?" Do you point your quavering finger at it and demand that it show itself? Do you threaten to ground it if it doesn't tell you what you need to know? Do you demand ACCESS? Bingo — that's it: Access. And that is what this column is about: Access 2007 (aptly named if I do say so myself).

Great name, Access — but what exactly is a database?

In case you've been living in a cave that you've constructed under your desk to avoid rush hour on the information highway, and you aren't familiar with Access, it's our — we at Microsoft Office — database software.

NOTE If you already KNOW what a database is and just want to cut to the chase, hop down to the section called "Erik and Crabby's top 5 new features in Access 2007." I don't want feedback from you self-proclaimed experts shouting at me (YES, IN ALL CAPS) that I'm full of fluff and nothing else. Sometimes some of my readers need a little background information, and I am trying to give it to them in this "what is a database?" section. So just get what you need out of this column, rate it as you will, and send your comments about its content, OK?

Alright, let's begin at the beguine: Data (which is the plural of datum, though I know that sounds a bit off) is a (usually large) collection of facts, records, or even pieces of knowledge all organized in a way that makes sense and is easy (or should be) to access (get it? Access?). That collection and those ways you use to get to your information is the database (and it's usually retrieved by a computer since the gremlins in those machines are very good at finding things). It's really quite simple (even though other programs developed by other companies, who shall not be named, seem to want to make it harder than it needs to be).

Examples of databases are online telephone books or maps, or the International Genealogical Index (the largest collection of free family history, family tree, and genealogy records in the world). Even your list of contacts in Outlook is a database. When you want to find someone, you are using a database — you're searching for someone by last name, or first name, or perhaps even doing a backward search, like you know what street a person lives on but can't quite remember his name (a little unusual, yes, but everyone's memory works a little differently — or sometimes not at all). Remember (if you still can) when you first entered (or re-entered because your computer crashed and you didn't follow my advice to constantly back up information such as this) all your contacts' information? You were creating a sort of database. So, even if you think you don't know what a database is, you actually do.

But I know, and I understand this (because I've been right there with you — I am NOT a database expert): Sometimes even the word "database" is enough to make you run screaming from the room. But it doesn't have to be this way. The beauty of Access (and Access 2007, in particular) is that all you really need is your information that you want organize and your image of wizards, templates, and other great Access features new, improved, or just as they've always been — to help you get through creating, updating, and even sharing your database.

Once you see that working with databases can be fairly simple (if you have the right tools, of course), you'll notice that they are very useful things; without them there would be no online driving directions, no records of all your unpaid parking tickets, no place you could post your resume as you search for another job while praying that someone will call you and rescue you from the boredom and madness you now call your full-time occupation...

But onto the nuts and bolts of this column: What's new in Access 2007, and what do you really need to know as you delve into it? An Access expert, Erik Rucker, and I are going to give you top five new features that are included in Access 2007. So see? It was really quite easy to get the info you wanted: All you needed to do was find this column — no password, no demands, no archeological dig...

Erik's (and Crabby's) top 5 new features in Access 2007

Although there are a heck of a lot more new (not to mention improved, not to mention already fine-as-they-are) features and capabilities in Access 2007, Erik and I pulled out five that we thought would grab your attention and get you, either as seasoned Access customers or new to the program, excited about the newest version our premier database software. (And now I know that you know what a database is, I know you're still here; you didn't run screaming out of the column. And honestly, I feel pretty good about that accomplishment. Well done, Crabby readers and Crabby.)

Feature #1: The new Report View

Access 2007 now allows you to modify reports while looking at the data. When you create a report (for example, by clicking **Report** on the **Create** tab on the Ribbon (part of the Microsoft Office Fluent user interface), you're dropped into **Layout View** and can immediately start working with the report. (You can also enter this view by opening a report and selecting **Layout View** from the view selector on the **Home** tab of the Ribbon.) In other words, you can see how data will appear in a report while you are creating it.

If you'd like to remove a column of data, simply click it and press DELETE. If you want to move a column, click it and drag to the right or left — you'll see a bold line where it will be inserted. To set the width, click the column, then click its right border and drag it to the right or left as you desire. To change the report title, click it and type. All your changes show up, and you can see how everything looks.

As well, there are three contextual tabs on the Ribbon that provide report editing tools, allowing you to set page orientation, formats, and so on. The most powerful of those tools are on the **Format** tab, and they are **Sort & Group** and **Add Existing Fields**. The **Sort & Group** button opens a pane below the report that helps you set the grouping and sort orders for your report. The **Add Existing Fields** button opens a pane to the right of the report with all the available fields for the report, allowing you to drag and drop them onto the report. For you old hands at Access, the old report **Design View** is still available, but we've found that **Layout View** makes most report authoring tasks much, much faster and much, much easier.

For more information, read about [the Report view in Erik's blog entry](#).

Feature #2: Integration with Outlook 2007

Access 2007 and Outlook 2007 (not to mention InfoPath 2007) work together to help you gather data by using e-mail. (Remember: "Data" is just a fancy word for "information.") Access 2007 builds a data collection form automatically for you in InfoPath or in HTML in the body of an e-mail message in Outlook. You can then send that form to recipients by using e-mail addresses from your Outlook contacts (or even from Access). You can select whether you want to collect new information or update existing information. Your recipient can fill out the form in the message and return the information you need. Outlook recognizes the forms and helps you save the information in your Access "data store" — thus updating the information in your database without retyping (and if you're like me, that is a good thing; I'm a loose typist — I mean lurid triptych — I mean LOUSY TYPIST).

Feature #3: Integration with SharePoint Services

You can now publish your Access files to libraries or move the database to a Microsoft Windows SharePoint Services Web site (moving the data and front-end database to the server) where others can interact with it easily through the browser. Even reports are available for others to see, and the information can be viewed, updated, or deleted directly on the SharePoint site. You can also choose to track the data with the Access client on your computer (then the server-based data is cached in your machine temporarily while the Access is open).

Read more about how this all works in [Erik's blog entry about integration with SharePoint](#).

Feature #4: The ability to attach external documents and files

Attaching external documents and files to individual records in the data store enables you to incorporate even more information into your Office programs. Attachments — from Word, PowerPoint, images, and so on — store data more efficiently. In older versions of Access, we used a technology called Object Linking and Embedding (OLE) to store documents and images. OLE would create a bitmap that could swell to 10 times as large as the original file. And we all know how we feel about sending and receiving ginormous files.

Now that you can use *attachments*, you open documents and other non-image files in their *parent* programs, so from within Access, you can search and edit those files. Access 2007 stores the attached files in their native formats with no supporting images, and you do not need to install additional software in order to view the images from within your database. It's all right there for you in a nice, small package.

Feature #5: PDF and XPS support

This is a feature that has been requested quite often. We now support it for the following programs: Access, Excel, OneNote, PowerPoint, Publisher, Visio, and Word (phew). There are situations when it's useful to save your file in what we call a "fixed layout format," which basically means that it's easy to share and print...yet hard (if not impossible) to modify. Think legal documents, resumes, or any other sort of file that is intended to be read, not rewritten.

In the case of Access 2007, you can save a report as a Portable Document Format file (PDF) or in XML Paper Specification (XPS) format for printing, posting, and e-mail distribution. By saving your report as a PDF or XPS file, you capture report information in an easily distributed form that retains all your formatting characteristics yet does not require others to have Office Access 2007 to print or review your report. And they can also NOT change it.

NOTE You do need an add-in for this, so for more information, read about how to [enable support for other file formats, such as PDF and XPS](#).

Erik: My hero of the week

If it weren't for Erik Rucker, I would have been up the proverbial creek — or database, as it were — without the proverbial paddle (or data). Erik is extremely knowledgeable when it comes to everything about Access, so please visit [Erik Rucker's Access blog](#) if you want to broaden your Access horizons (like I did).

"You can use all the quantitative data you can get, but you still have to distrust it and use your own intelligence and judgment." — Alvin Toffler

About the author

[Annik Stahl](#), the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the [Did this article help you?](#) feedback tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.