

Book Review

An Array of Challenges: Test Your SAS Skills

By Robert Virgile

Order #: #C55625, \$15.95, SAS Institute, Inc.

Reviewed By

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An Array of Challenges is aptly titled. The content spans dozens of topics, from features commonly used to infrequently seen. Topics are presented both singularly and combined, making for medium to complex challenges. This enjoyable book can be used for fun and learning by SAS programmers of all levels.

The book presents topics in two sections. There are 20 "Basic & Building Block" problems, for getting started and setting a knowledge base for the 50 "Tougher Problems". The problems are presented clearly and succinctly on often only a quarter of a page. At the bottom of the page, as a hint if you choose to look, is a list of "Tools and Concepts" covered in the question. Also on the first page, for the "Tougher Problems", is a clock for which to aim your solution completion time. Turning the page brings the SAS code of the problem thoughtfully repeated for reference, and a concise answer covering what should be covered. Along with the answer and the steps to the solution(s) are descriptions of the common pitfalls, the wrong paths often taken. Whatever function/feature/design of the SAS system that got the problem into this book, is nicely described.

The foundation for the book grew from problem-solving contests at user conferences. Thus, the timer clock mentioned above. There is also a grading/rating system for the reader with a competitive spirit.

The problems in the book cover tools and concepts of base SAS software. Some of the items listed in the appendix, almost an index, are: arrays, DATA step flow, data set options, do loops, formats, functions, lengths of variables, MERGE statement, RETAIN/ Sum statement, and Subsetting IF/DELETE.

Reading through the problems might bring to mind the word contrived. Also to mind might come the questions, "Who would ever do that?" or "Why would you ever code it that way?". Anyone who has worked a help desk knows that these problems probably exist in real life. And anyone wanting to learn, looks past any unlikely code to the point of the example. The value is information that may have never been found in a reference manual. And best of all, some of the problems bring the outcome, "Wow, I didn't know that" or "That's an interesting approach".

An Array of Challenges, as a book of brain teasers, or a benchmark of your SAS prowess, or as a way to learn, offers something for all SAS programmers.