How To Get around SUPPORT.SAS®.COM
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Abstract:

Need more SAS help than you can find in the manuals and user books? Then it is time to turn to the web, where one of the biggest and best sources is the SAS user-oriented site developed by the SAS Institute, http://Support.SAS.com. However, this site is so big, that you might need help getting around to locate the answer to your problem. The answer might be found in a FAQ (frequently asked question), a SAS Note, sample code, or in a feature, reported there, but too new to have worked its way into the documentation. You may submit a question and have a knowledgeable expert reply. You may want to get involved in one of the new forums where you will find ongoing discussions in areas of special interest. This paper can be your guide to getting help at this site.

Introduction:

A variety of strategies available on Support.SAS.com means you can choose one best suited to your need at a particular time. The SAS Institute is quite actively working to improve the site. Although there are links on it to www.SAS.com, the SAS Institute’s main web site, that site is more of a marketing site, whereas Support.SAS.com is a separate site, aimed more toward the programmer. The home page offers news items and tips of interest to SAS programmers, such as upcoming SAS web seminars. On the left of these news items is a set of links to the following seven categories:

- SAS 9 features
- Technical Support
- Documentation
- Samples
- Communities
- Software Downloads
- Training

To the right of the news items are some links to getting help for common needs, such as administrative services, user groups, publishing, and SAS certification.

What are the main reasons for going to a support web site? We want to:

- Ask a question -- need Technical Support
- See example code -- search Samples
- Know about the latest SAS/Base developments - see the RND section
- Check for bugs and find fix -- search SAS Notes
- Get updates and other downloads -- see Software Downloads
- Access documentation -- see Documentation
- Look for training opportunities - See Training
- Find out about certification -- See Certification.

I will discuss some of these topics in more detail.
Some details for getting help:

Documentation is the first place to think of when looking for details about SAS code. Your organization probably provides access to on-line documentation; however, there are many times when you want it and you may think it is not available. Fortunately, documentation is always available. Check the links on the left side of the Support.SAS.com home page. Documentation is one of them. There is a choice between versions 8 and 9. The version 9 documentation is easier to work with than the version 8. Therefore, I recommend using it. If your site is still using version 8, you may come across something not available to you, but that wasted minute, is compensated for by the ease of use, and you will be learning for the time when your organization does move to version 9. After choosing version 9, you get another choice between 1) regular HTML on-line documentation with Contents, Index, and a Search Facility, or 2) PDF files with the exact material that is in published hard copy manuals. Another advantage to choosing the version 9 documentation is that some versions of JAVA do not work well with the version 8 documentation because it is older.

The search facility in the on-line documentation is improving. A new generation of users will not know, for example, whether a statistical procedure should be looked up in Base SAS procedures, or Base SAS statistical procedures. S/he should not need to know. There is a distinction between procedures producing descriptive statistics and procedures producing inferential statistics. The FREQ procedure does both. The typical user thinks of the frequency procedure for obtaining counts, which are descriptive. However, another person may want chi square statistics to draw inferences. As of now, in version 9.1 documentation, explanation of the FREQ procedure can be reached from both Base SAS procedures and Base SAS statistical procedures. Under the former, a message says that the documentation has been moved. A click brings the user to the FREQ procedure within the statistical procedures.

Here is an example of a problem we can use the documentation to solve. Suppose you want the SAS tabulate procedure to show results in a different way from the default. Say you have three dimensions of information. Normally the tabulate procedure would create page, row, and column dimensions, for the first, second, and third named class variables respectively. It would go to a new page whenever the value of the “page” variable changed. Say that you want SAS not to go to a new physical page for a new value of the “page” variable. Let’s go to the version 9 Documentation and try to get an answer. There choose Base SAS. Unless you are dealing with one of the extra products that SAS licenses, Base SAS is usually the place to look. Then select Procedures, then Tabulate. Using the Edit/Find button on the browser’s toolbar, search for the word “page.” This brings you to Example 9, “Creating Multi-page Tables,” which lets you know about the option “Condense” to put multiple pages on one page.
In the case of a problem for which we cannot easily find a solution in the documentation, we have many other sources on the web site. I will go through an example of such a problem. I would like to know whether I can get a change of color in my ODS html output from gray to another color. I do not know whether to look in FAQ’s, or SAS Notes, or in sample code, for an answer. There are thousands of entries in each of those areas. I take the following steps: Select Technical Support on the left of the home page of support.SAS.com. Then on the right side of the Technical Support screen, where it says “Search the Tech Support Area,” click on “Advanced Search.” No, this does not mean for only advanced people. If we were advanced, we might not need it. “Advanced” will simply give us multiple ways to home in on an answer. On the screen shown below which came up when I clicked on Advanced Search, you can see that there is a variety of ways I can try to reach the best possible help for my question. I have indicated in the Search facility that I want it to select documents with certain criteria. They must contain the words “ODS” and “html” in the body of the document; they should contain the phrase “proc template” in the body of the document; and they should contain the words “inheritance,” “style,” and “color” in the body of the document. I have asked for ten hits, and I have selected “Show summaries.” I could also have specified “must not contain” to exclude documents that are not relevant and would clutter the results.

This search produced 829 results, including FAQ’s, Notes, and Samples. Near the top of the results was my question: “How do I change the table background from the default gray color to another color in ODS HTML output?” I succeeded!

On the subject of “Advanced Search,” I wanted to know the difference between “must contain” and “should contain.” When I write SAS code, I write key words “and,” “or,” and “not,” but “should” is not a key word. Does “Advanced Search” do something fuzzy with “should?” No. Here is what I found. If I filled in only the first section, the one where I selected “must,” and I left out the two sections where I selected “should.” I got the same 829 results. What do we get from adding “should?” When we use “should,” the list of results is sorted with the “should” words at the top. A reason for using “should” instead of “must” is that “must” might make the search too restrictive. Thus “should” is used for sorting, not for criteria.

What do you do when your question is not found by the Search facility in Tech Support? It is time to submit your question to a consultant at The SAS Institute. Click on “Submit a problem” within the Technical Support category. You will find a short form to fill out, including your e-mail address. You will get a tracking number, and usually within a day, an
answer. Do not worry if you think your question sounds elementary, and you would rather not have colleagues see it. Although the tracking number appears, your name does not appear on the web site, when you submit a question to the tech support staff at SAS Institute.

I had a problem recently that when I opened SAS version 8 documentation, I could not get beyond the high level categories to see the actual explanations. I submitted the problem and soon received the following response by e-mail:

“This SAS note may be helpful: [http://support.sas.com/techsup/unotes/SN/008/008953.html](http://support.sas.com/techsup/unotes/SN/008/008953.html)

Certain versions of JAVA are incompatible with our Version 8 online doc. We made changes in Version 9 so we would not be affected by such issues. ”

In this case my answer could have been found in the SAS Notes, had I thought of a way to specify the problem in the Search facility. A SAS Technical Support person, who has access to many resources, did not seem to mind digging it out for me.

When I am looking for help with a problem, I am sometimes confused by dense explanations. A route out of that confusion can be a sample of plain working code. I may not immediately understand why the code does what it does, but the log at least gives some positive feedback, and I may be able to use that code as a model for something similar I want to do, learning as I go. Using sample code does not teach you how something works, but alternating reading documentation with modifying and running sample code combines a top-down and bottom-up approach to understanding. We often need some of each. In the Samples category on Support.SAS.com, you will find a huge assortment of models to work with, all well categorized, to help you find the best one for your problem.

Communities:

This category on Support.SAS.com contains a treasure of useful material. A few sub-categories are:

- Base SAS
- Data Visualization
- Enterprise Integration
- Learning Edition
- Migration
- Scalability & Performance
- Statistics & Operations Research
- Web Technologies
- User Discussion Forums

There is such quantity and variety there that I recommend clicking on Communities yourself and browsing in many of these sub-categories; however, I would like to arouse your curiosity by giving some attention to two of them: Base SAS and User Discussion Forums.

Base SAS:

Paul Kent, Vice President and Director of Base SAS Software Research and Development, writes about the "tone of these pages:"

“We have tried to build on the successful interactions observed between SAS Institute R&D Staff and our customers when they mingle at SUGI and other user group functions, Demo Rooms, Formal Demo Theaters, Mixers and plain old chats in a hallway in between papers.”

He believes that by keeping the tone informal, ideas will be generated. He has gathered a choice selection of SUGI papers, FAQ's, and interesting links. To go along with the informal tone, he gives his e-mail address, because he welcomes comments.

It is not immediately apparent that you are in a Research & Development area for Base SAS. Selecting Communities from the home page of Support.SAS.com, then Base SAS would not tell you that you are in an R & D environment. Perhaps the letters “rnd” now added to the site address give a clue, but just click on Preproduction Software &
Documentation, and you will see some brand new features, so new that they come with a disclaimer. Here a new procedure is described:

Use the experimental **WEBMDDB procedure** to construct a multidimensional database (MDDB) from a SAS data set. With an associated JavaServer page (JSP), you can display the MDDB with drill-down and expansion capabilities on a Web browser.

Exciting! You can see what is out there for the future, and, if it suits your needs, start working with it now.

If you click on the ODS DATA Step Object, you will see links to a SUGI paper on the ODS DATA step object. You can download a .zip file from which you can extract a set of SAS programs to use as models. Before doing so, you will see a warning that the feature is experimental, but if it is of interest to you, then experiment.

**User Forums:**

These forums are a fairly new addition to the web site. The earliest date of postings that I found in most of the forums was in April, 2006. Like the R & D (rnd in the URL) for Base SAS, the forums are relatively informal. Some of the threads are similar to those in **SAS-L**, the popular SAS programmers’ question and answer site, but the forums on **Support.SAS.com** each have a designated topic or category. That does not mean that a person cannot post something within one of the categories that really is not much related to the category. After all, if they are informal, we have to assume that they accept the idea that a person might not even know his question is not well related to the topic. On **SAS-L** the emphasis is on questions and answers, with discussion secondary. In the forums, you can ask and answer questions, or you can discuss an issue. The five topics are:

- ODS and Base Reporting
- Integration with Microsoft Office
- SAS Enterprise Guide
- SAS Stored Processes
- SAS and Clinical Trials

How might the forums be useful to you? You might like to see how others have handled an issue similar to one you are handling. You might like to express a wish that a feature existed in SAS. Maybe it does, and someone can tell you what it is called, or maybe a SAS Institute person will respond. You may be able to offer suggestions and help others as well. You will not find huge archives since the forums are so new, but you will be starting the creation of them.

I wanted to test how the forums worked. Thus I decided to look for a question I might be able to answer. I was first asked to create a forum ID. I already had created a profile on the web site at an earlier time. Creating a forum ID was very fast. I then gave an answer to a question someone had asked. Before I posted my response, there were no replies. It was very simple to post, and within seconds, the thread showed as having one reply instead of zero. I hope it helped.

**Software Downloads:**

Here is a good place to get updates and maintenance fixes. I wanted to test it. Therefore I downloaded the SAS Viewer, which makes it possible to click on a SAS data set, in Windows Explorer, and quickly see the data in table view mode without fully opening the SAS system. The download of an executable file went smoothly. Executing that file made the SAS Viewer available. I tested it by a right click on a SAS data set, and saw a new option, “SASView,” in addition to the previous options, which included “Open with SAS 9.2.” SASView is much faster than opening the Display Manager or Enterprise Guide. If the variables have formats associated with them, only SAS System formats, not user-written formats, will be available in SASView.

**Training:**

Here you can find out about every kind of training: classes where you sit in the same room with an instructor who lectures and answers questions; hands-on classes where you solve problems with an instructor’s help; live web classes where you can also ask questions; and self-paced e-learning tutorials. In addition in this category on Support.SAS.com, you will find guidance for a curriculum path. The number of offerings can be overwhelming, and you may want suggestions for classes to take, and the appropriate order in which to take them.
Conclusion:

A *conclusion* to this paper is a *start* for access to a huge mine of information, constantly being improved and updated. In spite of its size, you will not get lost. Try some of the topics you have seen discussed here, and you will become comfortable on the site very quickly.

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